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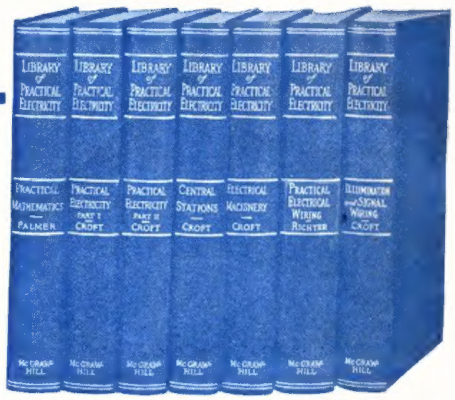
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WESTERN SHORT STORIES

MAY, 1942

Vol. 5 No. 1

★ 10 NEW ALL-STAR STORIES ★

PAGE

(1) **The Gunfighter Who Hated Gunfighters..by Peter Dawson** 8
Gun-veterans of the Deadwood and Virginia City booms, gents who'd known Wild Bill and the Plummer gang, still claimed Sheriff Phil Crawford was the roughest, toughest, fast-drawin'est lawdog in the West, and they looked to his button Steve for more of the old Crawford Colt-magic!

(2) **Buy in, Battle-Cub, or Burn Powder!...by Norrell Gregory** 26
Pick-branding or burning powder, it was all one to these ornery Captain boys and Dave Stobie knew they'd shoot first and then look at what they'd shot later!

(3) **Doc Hardy's Powdersmoke Prescription.....by Gunnison Steele** 36
The tinhorn medico's long fingers were as deft with a gun as they'd once been with a scalpel, and Doc Hardy could save one gent's life now only by grave-sending another!

(4) **.38 Thunder .....by Bill Davis** 45
Kent Harper and his lightning Colts or Billy Lane and his deadly guns—whichever one it was, he'd come back, at the head of a gun army or alone, to wipe out forever the owlhoot empire of Sid Renner and his hellions and bring freedom and justice to Red River Range once again . . .

(5) **Starpacker Stampede .....by Kenneth Fowler and Rod Patterson** 54
That sawed-off, addle-pated saddlepard of Piccolo's had a holsterfull of hell for any salty son who might figure he mebbeso wasn't exactly the man to be town marshal!

(6) **Colt-Crisis for a Green Kid.....by Raymond W. Porter** 64
Maybe the gun was made for more of a man than the kid guessed he'd ever be, maybe a green button like Joe should have learned how to slam lead before he went up the trail to Dodge . . .

(7) **Wanted: Four Kill-Crazy Gunslammers!...by D. B. Newton** 81
Wanted: Four Kill-hungry hardcases to draw iron with the man who Colt-smashed the Kid from No Man's Creek!

(8) **Wire, Water, and Winchesters.....by Morse Chandler** 88
The stranger didn't savvy that Jeff Dairen was laid up with a bullet wound and flat broke—the stranger just hankered to throw some hot lead!

(9) **Damned by the Dark Trails.....by H. A. DeRosso** 97
Hanged for horse-stealing, and for killing a couple of men—must that be the only range heritage Slim Carr could leave to this war-orphan?

(10) **Over Gunsights.....by Mojave Lloyd** 105
Dry-gulchers mebbeso bushwhacked Clint's blood-brother, but they'd have to smash Clint man-to-man over gunsights!

ROBERT O. ERISMAN—Editor

WESTERN SHORT STORIES, published every other month by Manvis Publications, Inc. Office of Publication, 4600 Diversey Avenue, Chicago, Ill. Editorial and executive offices, McGraw-Hill Bldg., 330 W. 42 St., New York, N. Y. Entered as second class matter December 31, 1937, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the act of March 3, 1879.
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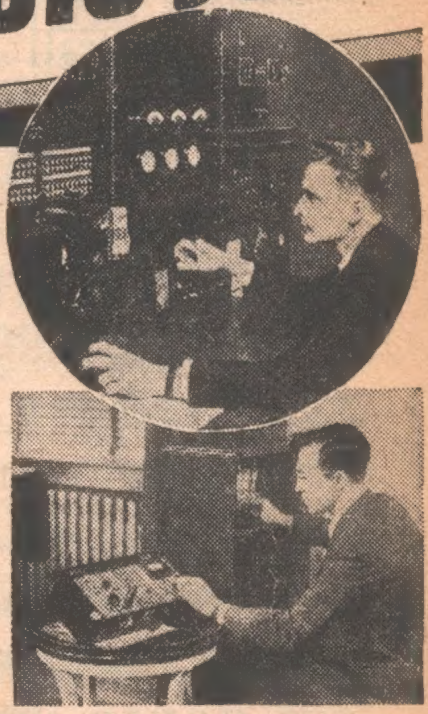

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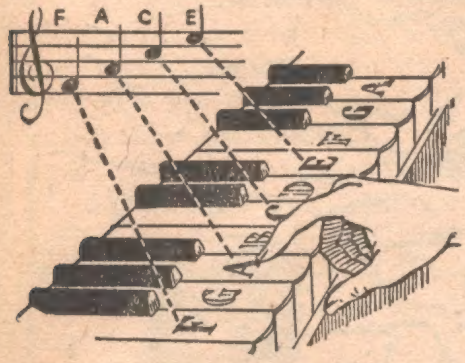

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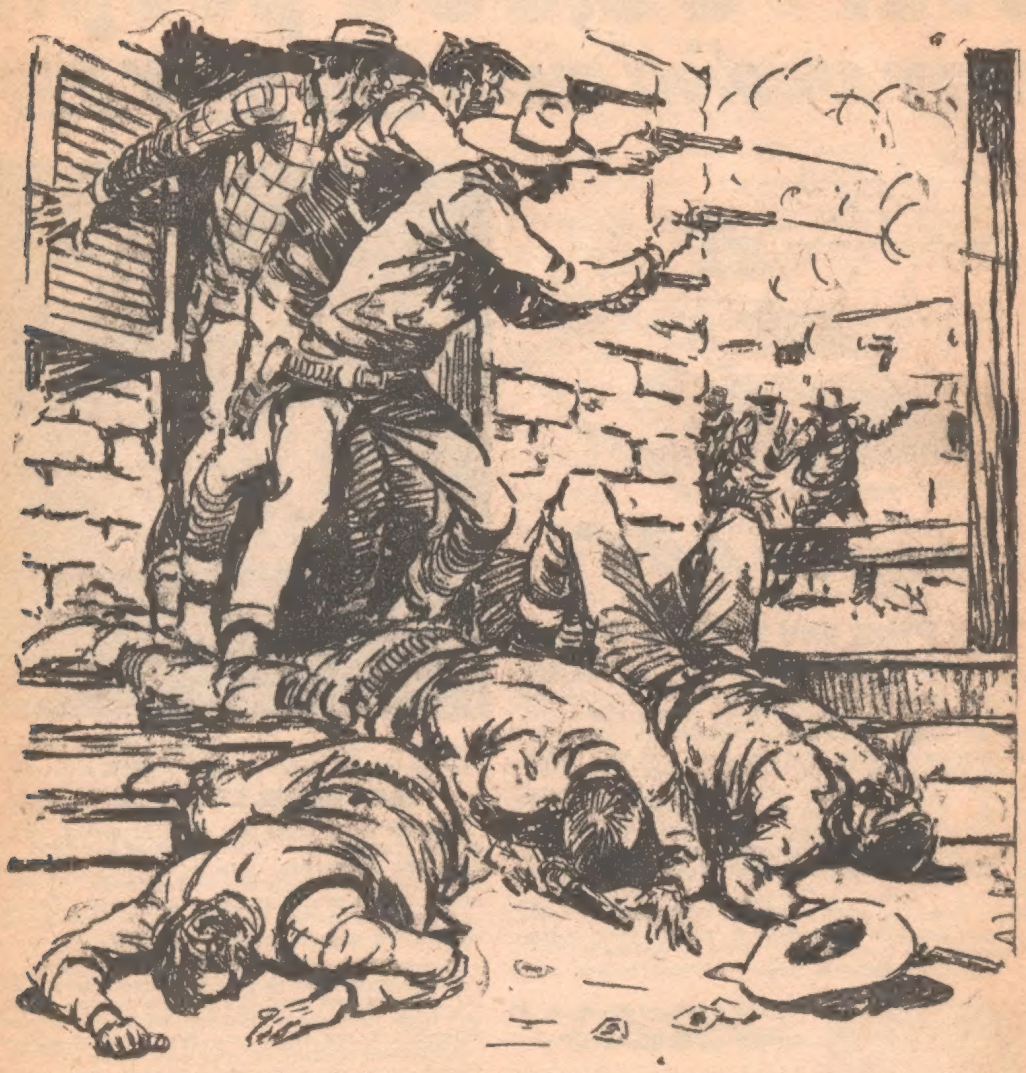
The Gunfighter Who Hated



It was guns and fists, with this one fearless

ONE year to the day after Steve Crawford's father died, Steve rode the three miles to Ledge and went to the Cattleman's Trust and Savings Bank and into the office of Bob Dorn, president. He laid a thick bundle of paper money on the banker's desk and Dorn, giving his tight smile and counting the money, finally looked up at him.

"Damned if you don't take the cake, Steve!" he said. "Your old man paid me interest on this money for eleven years and here you pay it off in one. You're as different from him as a mule is from a cuttin' horse. But you've

WHEN THE ROUGHEST, TOUGHEST, FAST-DRAWIN'EST LAW-

Gunfighters

By
PETER DAWSON
Author of "Ben Higgins' Tin-Can Draw," etc.

battle-cub wading into every man in the town!

done a fine job, my boy. Thanks."

Steve didn't mind being called a mule. People called him lots of things, he supposed. But that was to be expected since he was so different from his father and since Ledge citizens hadn't yet lost the habit of comparing them. This little matter of the sixteen hundred and forty-seven dollars he'd just given Dorn was a fair example; old Phil Crawford could have paid off that note the year after he took out the loan only that it wasn't his way. He'd never had a head for money, doubtless never knew the full resources of the ten section ranch he'd left his widow

DOG IN THE WEST HIRES-ON HIS OWN COLT-FAMOUS KID!

and son. He'd been too busy at other things.

Those other things had made the name of Sheriff Phil Crawford a legend in this country. Gates, the bartender at the *Peacock*, to this day would point out to strangers the seven bullet-holes along the face of his counter and tell how Sheriff Crawford, facing three members of the Wolf Creek bunch, had stood with his back to the bar, and shot it out with that trio and in the end signed their death-certificates. And Doc Monroe, veteran of the Deadwood and Virginia City booms, still claimed as he had for years that Phil Crawford was the roughest, toughest, "fast-draw-in'est" gent he'd ever laid eyes on; and Doc had known the Plummer gang and Wild Bill and all the rest.

At twenty, Steve had his father's looks; but that was as far as it went. Standing six foot-two, with a lean freckled face, pale blue eyes and a thatch of straw-colored hair, he had the same trouble as the elder Crawford in finding shirts wide enough at the shoulders to fit him, trousers long enough and small enough in the waist for him to wear. He was strong, too, probably as strong as his father had been—although the only real evidence people had of that came on the day two years ago when Steve was watching the new town well being drilled. That morning the heavy timber boom of the drilling rig broke loose from its guy-wires and fell on a workman, pinning his legs; Steve was the first to reach him and single-handed lifted the boom and heaved it aside. Later, it took two husky men to budge the boom and Steve came in for a lot of unwanted credit.

"It's his mother that's raisin' him, not me," Sheriff Crawford had once confided to a friend in trying to explain Steve's quiet ways. Then he'd added a little proudly, "His brain'll get him just as far as my hands and my guns got me."

This was the only direct mention Sheriff Crawford ever made of the difference between him and his son. No one ever knew of the bitter words he and his wife had had one night when Steve was seven, on the day the sheriff took Steve to town to get a hair cut. Steve had seen his father kill a man that day. It happened while he sat in the barber-chair. Two drunken miners, down from the diggin's to spend a week's pay, and decided to use up their ammunition breaking store-windows. Sheriff Crawford went onto the street to try and stop the destruction; one of the miners was foolish enough to turn his gun on the law man and was dead two seconds later, lying in the dust of the street with his body jerking in a last convulsion, the blood welling from a bullet-hole in his throat. Steve saw it all but managed to get home before he broke down. That night Mrs. Crawford arrived at a solemn understanding with her sheriff husband. Steve was never to learn to use a gun, he was never to learn his father's cunning with fists and feet, since these accomplishments had made the law man the target for every glory-hunter that drifted into the country and had given his wife a head of grey hair at the age of thirty-five.

SO STEVE grew up to know more about books and history and mathematics than he did about guns and the best way to cripple a man in a bar-room brawl. At twelve his eyes weakened temporarily and he had to wear glasses. He wore them until the gang at school started calling him "Specs." In his rage at being given the name, he took off his glasses and threw them away, and afterwards licked the three leaders of the school gang. After that they let him alone because he wanted to be let

alone. And he didn't forget that fight, either, for he'd given one of the boys a bloody nose and the sight of the blood made him remember the day his father had shot the man in town. He never got into a fight again, not because he was afraid but because he was big enough so that no one ever wanted to fight him.

His mother didn't object to his helping his father's one hired man work the ranch. Steve developed the sure ability of a natural rider; he could stick onto the back of any horse they'd give him, and he could outride and outrope any of the hands who helped at fall round-up. Men learned to respect him but at the same time let him alone.

Today, sauntering down the walk from the bank, he felt a little proud over having paid off that note. He'd been lucky last summer with alfalfa, putting in a lot of it under ditch while other ranchers laughed at the idea of a stiff winter ahead. Last winter he'd cashed in on that huge alfalfa crop and this spring his cattle were the fattest and sleekest on the range and he had been paid a fancy price for half the lot —all he needed to sell to take care of the note.

In front of Len Medary's *Pool and Billiard Hall,* Steve met Jerry O'Dea and Bill James. Bill queried, "How about some pinochle, stranger?" wanting to be friendly, and Steve, feeling guilty over never spending any time with the crowd his own age, answered, "Why not?"

He had caught the irony behind Bill's "stranger" and for the next hour tried to ease the feeling that lay behind the word. It was hard at first, for O'Dea and Bill James were friends and there was a lot of small talk between them and Hal Thompson, Frank Bird and Price Halloway, who were playing a game of kelly at the pool-table. But after that first hour Steve lost the feeling that he was an outsider; some of the old familiarity of their days at school came back and in the end it wasn't as though he saw these men only once or twice a month and had nothing in common with them.

They had some news for him. Ed Haldeman, who had served as Phil Crawford's deputy for years and was now sheriff, had been spilled off his horse while antelope-hunting and had come out of it with a broken leg. He'd be laid up for a month and this afternoon the Commissioners were selecting a new deputy to act for him. Ordinarily Ledge could have gone for days, even weeks, without the services of a law man. But two days ago three bandits had held up a bank a hundred miles north and the rumor had it that the trio was headed south.

A second piece of news brought with it a surprise. Bill James, between hands, asked: "How come you're in so strong with Mary Belden, Steve?"

"Who said I was?" Steve queried.

"She did. I asked her to the dance tonight and she said she was going with you."

"Oh, that!" Steve laughed, making it sound genuine enough. Mary Belden, whose father ran the hardware-store, had only a month ago returned from a year's stay with relatives in Denver. Steve had been surprised to find her a grown woman. She had attended a college in Denver, and in this past year had acquired a poise and a subtle attractiveness that blended with her good looks to make her someone far beyond his reach and not the girl his father had always teased him about. His interest quickened as he realized what Bill James' statement meant; he hadn't seen Mary in two weeks, hadn't even known that there was to be a dance tonight. He'd have to stop at her house this afternoon and get the straight of this.

"You needn't be so cock-sure about it!" Bill grumbled, tempering his mock-anger with the hint of a smile. "We're all out to beat your time."

As Bill was speaking, the door up front swung open and Ray Severn, foreman for Miller's X8, came in with two men of his crew. The talk at the pool-table immediately died out. Hal Thompson concentrated on the shot he was making for the side-pocket.

SEVERN, in his late twenties and a tall handsome man, wasn't liked around Ledge. He'd been in the country for only two years and was a comparative stranger. That alone wouldn't have been against him; but when coupled with his arrogance and the fact that he knew his job and let everyone know he knew it, his being a newcomer was resented. His outfit was always on the gaudy side. Today he wore a fawn-colored stetson that was spotlessly clean, pink sleeve-garters on the arms of his black silk shirt and a pair of polished fancy-stitched boots.

He came across and asked Hal Thompson, "How soon can we have the table?"

"When we're through," Hal answered.

"And when'll that be?"

Hal dropped the butt of his cue to the floor and straightened. It looked as though he was going to tell Severn a thing or two; but all at once he seemed to see Spud Welch and Mike Moore, Severn's two men. Mike was a scrapper and Welch looked like a man able to take care of himself. So Hal toned down his answer: "Half an hour, maybe. Maybe longer."

"See here!" Severn bridled. "You guys don't own this table!"

Frank Bird, an undersized man Steve's age, and with a small man's hot-headedness, came around the table and said, "The hell we don't! We bought the table this mornin', Severn. Go over and sit down and wait your turn and we may decide to give you a cue after a while."

Severn himself probably couldn't have later explained the impulse that made him reach out and push Frank Bird roughly away. The heel of Frank's boot caught against Hal Thompson's cue and he tripped and fell. It looked worse than it was.

As Frank hit the floor, Hal's temper broke and he swung at Severn. His fist grazed the ramrod's shoulder. Mike Moore, grinning, stepped in alongside Severn and swung a choppy blow that caught Hal on the point of the jaw and jarred him badly. Then, blind with rage, Hal swung his cue.

Severn dodged barely in time to escape being brained. Spud Welch wasn't quite fast enough. The butt of the cue caught him squarely on the ear. He let out a groan of pain and then Mike swung again and knocked Hal sprawling backward onto the table. Frank Bird was on his feet a second later and wading into the big Irishman with viciousness not unlike a banty rooster's.

Alongside Steve at the table, Bill James said, "Let's clean house on those jaspers!" He rose, kicked his chair out of the way and started toward Mike Moore. Jerry O'Dea followed, calling, "Come along, Steve!"

Bill James was of medium height and chunky. He came in fast, taking Moore by the shoulder and spinning him around and meeting him with a stiff uppercut that jarred the Irishman from boot-soles to Stetson. Spud Welch had thrown himself on Hal Thompson and was driving in blows to his face, while Severn saw Jerry crossing from the pinochle-table and smiled mirthlessly and advanced to meet him.

Len Medary, at his cash-register up front, bellowed, "Lay off, you side-

winders, or I'll . . ." only to have his words drowned out as Severn knocked Jerry O'Dea back into the cue-rack, letting fifteen cues clatter to the floor.

Steve Crawford felt a slow numbness settling through him. His pulse was pounding, every impulse was urging him to get up out of his chair and go across and beat Ray Severn's darkly handsome face to a pulp. But he couldn't move; he was remembering his mother, her warning against ever being like his father.

TWO green-shaded kerosene lamps hung over the pool-table. Mike Moore, with calculated c u n n i n g, backed away from Bill James long enough to reach for one of the fallen cues. Then, coming in fast toward Bill and Frank Bird, he swung the cue fan-wise in a broad arc. Bill and Frank sprawled out of the way. Mike kept coming on. He hit the lamp-rack above the table with all the force of his chunky body behind the cue. The lamps shattered, fell to the green felt of the table. Luckily the kerosene didn't catch fire.

In the room's near darkness, Steve felt the sudden urge to be out of here, to be away from a thing he had been taught to avoid. He saw Ray Severn coming toward him. He got up out of his chair and ran out through the back door of the pool-hall and into the alley.

He came onto the street four doors below Price's place. When he looked back it was in time to see the swing-doors suddenly burst outward and Frank Bird sprawl out across the walk. Frank lit face down in a sticky stretch of mud in the gutter. An instant after he picked himself up, Mike Moore backed out of the doors and was followed immediately by Bill James. For a moment the two stood toe to toe on the walk, slugging it out. Then Frank Bird waded into Mike and he and Bill gradually worked the Irishman off the walk and into the street. Mike finally turned and ran.

That was all Steve waited to see. He hurried to the feed-barn, saddled his roan and paid the hostler who had been in the back corral and hadn't seen the fight. Because the hostler was there, Steve was too proud to leave by the back way.

As he led the roan out onto the street, he looked once more toward the pool-hall, having decided to take the opposite direction out of town and circle once he was in open country.

The walk in front of Price's was clear now. Steve was wondering who had won the fight, what had happened to Ray Severn, when a voice from behind him drawled, "There he is."

He turned, and directly across the street saw Frank Bird and Hal Thompson and Bill James standing on the walk. A short distance away were half a dozen other men who had evidently witnessed part of the fight and had come down the street with Hal and the others.

Thompson said bitingly, "You're sure a scrapper, Steve. Much obliged for the help!"

Steve couldn't find the words for an answer.

Then, as he hesitated, a beady perspiration coming to his forehead and dampening his palms, Frank Bird came down off the opposite walk and sauntered across the dusty street toward him. Frank's blunt jaw was thrust outward in an ugly expression; his nose had been bleeding and the lower part of his face was smeared with blood and one of his eyes was swollen nearly shut.

Steve would have run, only that a slow paralysis had settled through him and wouldn't let him lift his boot to stirrup. Frank stopped within arm-reach of him. Then, looking up at Steve, who was a good head taller, he

said: "I think I'll take you apart and find out just where that yellow streak begins!"

On the heel of his words his right arm cocked and he lashed out a stinging open-handed blow that caught Steve full on the cheek and rocked his head.

Frank waited, fists clenched, crouching. When two seconds later he saw that Steve wasn't going to fight back, his one good eye opened wide in amazement. He called back over his shoulder: "Hell, he won't even pick on someone that ain't his size! This isn't any fun!"

"Let him alone," Bill James called. "He's all done up from that other brawl, Frank."

It was then that Steve looked downstreet and saw Mary Belden standing on the walk watching him. Her pretty face wore a puzzled, half-frightened look and was tinged with a flush of color. She had obviously witnessed Steve's humiliation and now stood tall and straight, her chestnut-haired head up, as though silently defying these men for him.

Frank Bird said with cutting sarcasm, "It's a shame none of these eastern fight-promotors never set eyes on you, Steve. You'd make a cleanin' in the ring!" Hearing this, a couple of the onlookers on the walk guffawed loudly.

STEVE didn't wait for more. He turned his back on Frank Bird and swung up into the saddle. A silence more expressive than words hung on as he started down the street.

He didn't look at Mary Belden, and was almost past her before she called in a low voice, "Steve! Come here!"

He went against every impulse as he reined in toward the walk. He sensed what was coming as he drew rein and lifted his glance to meet hers. She was pale, and a sharp anger lay deep in her eyes along with a certain warmth. "Is it true?" she asked in a hollow, lifeless voice. "Did you run out on Frank and Bill?"

He nodded mutely, unable to find the words to answer her.

His gesture did something to her eyes; it blotted out the warmth that lay in them and in its place came a cool expression of utter scorn.

She laughed and the sound of her voice lacked all mirth. "And to think that I was once in love with you!" she breathed. Then, turning on her heel, she walked away from him.

On the three mile ride out to the ranch, Steve punished the roan unmercifully until, sobering, he had that added shame to heap on top of the other. By the time he was off-saddling at the corral below the house, he was half insane from self-loathing. As he carried saddle and bridle to the wagon-shed, his mother called down from the kitchen-door of the house; "Mary Belden rode out this afternoon, Steve. She wants you to take her to the dance tonight. Shall I press your good pants?"

He nodded back to her, not trusting himself to speak. And in that moment he was remembering that she had shaped his life, sheltered him from the things that go to put a backbone in a man. For the first time in his life he began to lose his faith in her, to see her not as a person of unassailable judgment but as a rather selfish and timid woman protecting him in much the same way a hen will guard her chick.

The Commissioners held their meeting that afternoon in Sam Belden's office at the back of the hardware-store. The fight in the pool-hall went on during the meeting and none of them knew of it until afterward. The only business on hand was to appoint a deputy to act in Sheriff Ed Haldeman's absence.

Various men were considered for the

job, none of them quite satisfactory for one reason or another. During the course of the conversation, Sam Belden said, "It'd be a fine tribute to pay Phil Crawford if we could pin a law badge on young Steve."

"No one liked Phil better than I did," Abe Hyman said. "But hell, Sam, young Steve hasn't got the guts to pick up his hat if someone knocks it off his head!"

Sam Belden didn't argue the point and it was forgotten a minute or so later. They decided on Luke Appleby as their deputy. Later, Belden heard of the pool-hall fight and was pleased to think that Ray Severn had been taken down a peg or two; but he didn't like what he heard about Steve Crawford running out on his friends. Still later he went home for his supper to have Mrs. Belden tell him, "Sam, go upstairs and see what's wrong with Mary. She's in her room with the door locked. I think I heard her crying."

Belden knew a thing or two about his daughter, one of which was that Mary's eyes gave her away each time she saw Steve Crawford and each time his name was mentioned. So he told his wife," Let her cry it out—whatever it is."

Steve nursed his pent-up feelings during the hour before supper, avoiding his mother and finding a few jobs that kept him out of doors, away from her. But as they sat at the kitchen-table she noticed that he was pale, that he didn't eat and that once or twice he clenched the fist that held his fork at some inner thought.

FINALLY she said, "Tell me about it, Steve. What's wrong?"

"Who said anything was wrong?" he said in a tone he had never used with her before. Then, realizing how it must have sounded, he added: "It wouldn't help if you knew, Mother."

"But you always tell me things, Steve. Was it something someone said? Was it . . ."

"Worse than that," Steve cut in. And because his mind was a turmoil of conflicting thoughts, because he felt the need of talking with someone who would give him sympathy, he told her to the last detail the things that had happened that afternoon in town.

"Poor boy!" she said when he had finished. She got up out of her chair and came around to him, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Did Frank Bird hurt you? Where did he hit you, Steve?"

He shifted his shoulders nervously and in irritation, so that her hand fell away. "It didn't hurt," he muttered. "If it'd only been Bill James, or Thompson. They're my size. I could have struck back!" As soon as the words were out he knew that he lied, that it hadn't been because Frank Bird was a smaller man that he hadn't returned that blow. It was because at the time he had told himself he was afraid.

"Fighting!" his mother said indignantly. "I'll speak to Mrs. Bird about it at church tomorrow!"

"You will not!" Steve exploded, abruptly angered at this all too familiar reaction of his parent. "There's a time when a man has to fight! The point is, I should have helped Bill and Frank and Hal there at the pool-hall. They'd been nice enough to me, asking me in to play cards. If only I'd . . ."

"Stephen, I won't have you playing cards with those rowdies," Mrs. Crawford began.

"Lay off, will you!" Steve cut in. He threw down his napkin, got up from the table and went to his room; he was angry at his mother's manner, ashamed at the thought of what his father would have said under like circumstances. Phil Crawford would have first

whipped him—probably with his fists, since Steve was now a grown man—and then sent him back to town and told him not to come back until he'd licked the pants off Frank Bird and Hall Thompson and Bill James, singly or collectively.

This thought, strangely enough, made him proud of his father in a way he had never been before. Right now Steve Crawford would have given his right arm to be half the man his father had been. He could look back over the years and see each step toward this ultimate picture of himself—the day in the barber-chair in town, the bitter argument between his father and mother that night, the countless times afterward when he had avoided scraps at school and the many nights when he had been at home wishing he could be out with the rest of the gang. That desire to be one of the crowd, like the other boys he knew, had been gradually put down by his mother's continued insistance that she wouldn't see him grow to be like his father; and because Steve always remembered the miner dying from his father's bullet, he had given in to her.

But now, as his mother came to the door of his room and called softly, "Are you all right, Steve?" he answered curtly, "Of course!" and took a secret pleasure in bridling under her rein. A gradual change was taking place in him. He wished now that he could be once more in the pool-hall, hearing Bill James say, "Let's clean house on those jaspers!" He'd get up out of his chair and head straight for Ray Severn. His arm-muscles tightened as he imagined how he would hit Severn. Then the reality of his room with the dimly-burning kerosene lamp on the wash-stand brought him back to the present and the futility of such thoughts. He realized that it was too late. Everyone, even Mary, thought him a coward.

He looked at his surroundings with a critical eye. There were lace curtains at the windows, a colorful Navajo blanket hung at the opening of the closet. A fine linen spread covered his bed and a hand-embroidered scarf lay centered under the pitcher and bowl on the wash-stand. More like a girl's room than a man's, Steve was thinking; and in a sudden rage he crossed to the window and pulled the curtains down off the rod and threw them to the floor.

HE WENT to the closet and took out a heavy pair of bull-hide chaps, throwing them on the cedar-chest. He went to the closet again, rummaged in a corner and brought out an old flintlock rifle. He hung this on the nails above the window that had held the curtain-rod. He took the cover from the bed and replaced it by the Navajo blanket, leaving the closet doorway open and untidy-looking. Then, still not satisfied, the scarf came off the wash-stand to be replaced by an assortment of trinkets—a pair of worn-out spurs, a clasp-knife, all the change he had in his pockets, and lastly a corn-cob pipe and a buckskin tobacco-pouch that had been his father's and which he took out of the wash-stand's bottom drawer.

Once more his critical glance ran over the room. It was different now, the impersonal quality to it gone. It was a man's room. And this change did something to fan alive a spark of pride within Steve. He was enjoying it. He knelt in front of the wash-stand and started going through the contents of the bottom drawer of the wash-stand that still stood open. His mother had stored many of his father's belongings there.

Beneath a pile of shirts, his fingers touched something cold and hard that made him draw his hand quickly away.

He pushed aside the shirts and knelt staring down at his father's gun-belts, the twin holsters and the pair of cedar-handled Colt's .44s that had swung for so many years at Phil Crawford's thighs.

The stubbornness of anger was still riding strong in him. He forced himself to reach down and pick up first one holster and then the other. He drew the guns from their leather sheaths, and sat idly hefting them in his hands. He hadn't touched a Colt's in years, yet now he felt a strange liking for the feel of the weapons. The butts fit his big palms snuggly, the balance of the weight was smooth. He even raised the weapon in his right hand and took a sight on the window-ledge across the room.

All at once he realized what he was doing—handling a pair of guns when he had always thought that he couldn't bear touching one. He laughed out loud, strangely excited over this new discovery. He was no longer afraid of these death-dealing machines of cold steel.

This realization set up a warmth in him that gave him a new feeling of sureness. He toyed with the idea of getting up and strapping on the holsters, tying them to his thighs, low down, the way his father had worn them. But as he was about to give way to the impulse, he heard his mother's step sound in the hallway beyond the door, and he quickly dropped guns and holsters into the drawer and closed it.

When Mrs. Crawford opened the door she stared first at him, then across the room and her eyes opened wide with shocked surprise. "Steve, what have you done?" she cried. She crossed the room with quick steps and picked up the curtains, holding them up and eyeing him in hurt wonder. "Don't you like them, Steve?"

He stood up, the helpless frustration of the supper-hour once more taking its hold on him. He began, "I—I was trying to—"

"And this!" his mother cried, picking up the bull-hide chaps and carrying them back into the closet. She threw them into the corner of the cubbyhole room, facing him again and saying, "Next you'll be wanting to get your father's guns out and hang them on the wall!"

Steve gave in then. He took his stetson from the chair alongside the bed and went to the door. "I'd better be getting in to town," he said.

"In those clothes?"

"I'll stop by Mary's house and tell her I'm not going to the dance."

"But you've already promised her!"

Steve shook his head, smiling thinly in an expression that strangely enough reminded Mrs. Crawford of a certain bleak smile she had often seen on her husband's lean face. "I'd rather not, Mother," Steve said. "The boys would all be there and there might be trouble."

"Then you should certainly stay away," Mrs. Crawford was on her dignity.

Steve took his time on the ride in to Ledge. He wasn't going to make his excuses to Mary Belden—not after the thing she had seen on the street that afternoon. By now she had certainly seen Bill James and arranged to go to the dance with him. He had given his mother that excuse only so that he could leave the house and be alone with his thoughts.

HE WONDERED idly why he was heading toward town instead of further on out the trail. This thought didn't occur to him until he was within half a mile of Ledge, until the town's winking lights pin-pointed the darkness ahead. When it did occur to him he reined the roan around and started

back, intending to ride past the ranch and angle over toward the hills to the north. He had a lot to think over tonight, chiefly his discovery that the thought of carrying a six-gun no longer terrified him. He had gone back along the trail less than a hundred yards when the distance-muffled explosions of three gun shots suddenly came booming across the night's stillness.

Those shots made him rein in once more and turn in the saddle and look back toward the lights of the town. Ledge had long ago forgotten the sound of guns blasting into the night; Phil Crawford had tamed the town, made this country one in which a man rarely used a six-gun even though he wore one. As a slow curiosity was mounting in Steve over the gun-shots, two more racketed closely-spaced from out of the distance.

That sound of gun-fire made Steve turn and lift his roan to a quick lope. He didn't pause to define his curiosity and realize that it was a new excitement akin to the one he had felt less than half an hour ago, on discovering that he no longer feared the feel of a gun. He didn't even let the strange foreboding that trouble lay ahead turn him back. In fact, it made him ride faster.

The trail made a wide turning into the straight street of Ledge. Abreast of the first houses, Steve could see the many figures standing in the street, far to this side of the awninged walks lit by the store-windows at the town's center. The walks up there in front of the stores looked deserted; the presence of the crowd, clear of the business section of the town, was strange.

Steve came even with several figures standing under the deep shadow of a clump of tall locust trees a hundred yards short of the spot where the main crowd moved restlessly in the street. He called to the group, "What's happening up there?"

A voice he didn't recognize answered, "Luke Appleby was shot. Three hardcases were makin' a try at the bank and he caught 'em at it. They're forted up in the hardware store now knockin' a hole through the bank wall. They've got Sam Belden and his girl in there and . . ."

Steve didn't wait to hear the rest. With a wild surge of unreasoning rage he put spurs to the roan and the animal lunged ahead, breaking from a stand to a run. The man's words, *they've got Sam Belden and his girl in there* kept repeating themselves over and over in his mind. The hardware store stood alongside the bank. Three men, having shot the new deputy, were tearing away the brick wall of the store as a way into the bank. And from the deserted walks near the town's center that Steve could now plainly see, the chances of the outlaws making a clean getaway were good.

For the second time that night the blood of his father that ran in Steve Crawford's veins was dissolving the softness in him. He was acting purely on impulse, and in his father's headlong way he wasn't stopping to define his impulses. All he could think of was that Mary Belden was in real danger, and in the blindness of his anger he was filled with a lust to face the men who were holding her there in the store with her father.

As he rode up on the fringes of the loosely packed crowd spread across the darkened street, a figure dodging out of the way of the roan reached up and snatched the bridle and pulled the animal to a stop, growling, "You damn' fool! You can't go in there!" It was Bill James; in another second he had recognized Steve. "Oh, it's you!" he said dryly. "Better tuck your tail and get out of here. The lead's been flyin'."

Steve swung aground. "Can't someone do something about it, Bill?"

"Appleby thought he could. He's dead now."

"Why can't they get a few rifles and cut them down as they come out?"

BILL JAMES' blunt face shaped a wicked smile. "They'll have Mary with 'em when they come. You feel like takin' a shot at her?" James remembered something then that made him add: "Or have you the guts to even talk hold of a Winchester?"

Steve caught the biting sarcasm to the words, ignored it. He dropped the roan's reins and ran toward the walk, his long strides carrying him obliquely across the street and toward the two lighted windows of the sheriff's office. It was a small frame building, backed by the new stone jail and well down the cleared portion of the walk, beyond the crowd.

As he stepped up onto the walk and pushed roughly through to the front of the crowd, a man reached out and took a hold on his arm, warning him sharply, "Stay back, Crawford! They've got a guard out front."

That command and the man's hold on his arm was meant to stop Steve. He knotted his fist and knocked the man's hand away and stepped out ahead of the crowd. There was a look in his eye that silenced the protest the man was about to utter.

Steve walked on and into the dim light coming from the window of the harness-shop two doors below the jail. As his tall frame was outlined by the light, a gun set up its throaty explosion from up-street in front of the hardware store and its echo set up a beating blast down the canyon made by the two lines of buildings. As the bullet flicked a splinter from one of the planks on the walk, Steve gave a low laugh and broke into a run. A coolness had settled along his nerves, not the fear that had ridden with him for so long. And his voice as he laughed had a mocking ring to it, the same brittle quality that men had noted in his father's voice.

He was turning in at the sheriff's office when a second explosion ripped away the silence along the street. The bullet fanned the air along his face, and once again he felt no trace of fear.

There were four men in the sheriff's office. Two stood at the window to the left of the door, faces close to the glass and looking intently up the thoroughfare outside. These were Stewart James, Bill's father, and Myron Redwold, owner of the hotel. Sid Delaney, a rancher, sat in the chair before the sheriff's desk and straightened at the sound of the door opening; and Fred Olney, clerk at the bank, was nervously pacing the floor.

Delaney saw who it was, snapped, "Now what the hell's this, Crawford? Don't you know . . ."

His words broke off as Steve came across the room to reach up to the gun-rack above the desk. A full shell-belt and a holstered Colt's hung from a nail on the rack. Steve took it down, undid the buckle and was swinging the belt about his thighs as he said, "Tell me what happened. And be damned quick about it! We've got to do something."

There was a commanding note in his voice that surprised him as much as it did these others. Then, in a sudden dawning realization, he saw that he hadn't been afraid walking along the street, that the nearness of the bullets had only fanned the fire of anger in him to a greater heat. In a sudden burst of wild joy that made him want to shout, Steve Crawford knew that he had never really been afraid of anything, that it was his mother's long training in cautiousness that had made him always hold back. This afternoon in the pool-room he hadn't really been afraid but unconsciously aware of his mother's training and her warnings that he was

committing a wrong in ever being like his father.

Now he was standing here speaking sharply and without restraint to men he had held in awe all his life. He saw that Stewart James' glance had narrowed in shocked surprise. James began, "See here, Crawford! Where do you get . . ."

"Never mind that!" Steve drawled flatly, "I want to know what's happened!"

James swallowed thickly and said in a different, milder tone, "three hardcases rode in right after dark. They were at the alley door of the bank, trying to break in, when Luke Appleby ran smack into them. Luke was cut down and the three tried to make a getaway through the hardware store. The customers in there went out onto the street and stopped 'em from comin' that way. Belden's girl was there. One of the three held her in front of him and came out and cleared the street. Now they're in the store knockin' a way through the wall and into the bank. They've got a guard front and back. We don't dare go after 'em because of the girl."

STEVE said, "A couple of you go out through the jail and into the alley. Two more can work across the street and when I come out and start down there see if you can toll that guard's guns off me."

"That's been tried," James said. He eyed Steve quizzically for an instant. He had been at the Commissioner's meeting this afternoon and had heard of the fight in the pool-room. "Say, what's got into you, Crawford?"

Steve ignored the implications to his question, feeling a strange exultancy at the weight of the holster along his right thigh. He reached down and lifted the Colt's clear, rocking open the loading-gate and spinning the cylinder to make sure that it was loaded. The chamber under the hammer was empty; he shucked a shell from the belt and dropped it into the cylinder, returning the weapon to leather.

His thoughts were coming fast now, sorting through and discarding half a dozen ideas. All at once his glance went to a corner of the room's ceiling. He was looking at the two-foot-square opening made between the roof joists to form a trap door. He whipped his glance down at Stewart James and spoke to him directly.

"I'm going across the roofs," he said levelly. "And while I'm on my way I want that guard out front kept busy. Are you with me?"

James' eyes lighted for an instant as he saw the possibilities. He was doubtless remembering that the buildings on down the street were all single story, some false-fronted, and that the space between them was never too wide for a man to jump. And he might be remembering the peaked skylight in the center of the hardware-store's roof.

He turned to face the desk, ignoring Steve and saying to Delaney, "Sid, you and Fred take the alley. Throw some lead along it and keep that guard busy. Redwold, put out this light and throw up the window and make it hot for that guard in front of the store. I'll . . ."

"And I'll take the roof," Steve's voice cut in flatly.

There was a brittle quality to his words that brought Stewart James' glance swinging around to him. James said, "This is a man's job, Crawford."

"That's why I'm taking it," came Steve's level answer.

This wasn't the Steve Crawford these men knew. This was a tall, sure man whose pale blue eyes were touched with a cold uncompromising light. This was Phil Crawford's ghost, and Stewart James thought as much as he looked at Steve.

Delaney was the one who finally de-

cided the matter. He got up out of the chair and dragged it in under the trap-door, saying, "Give him a chance, James."

Steve walked quickly to the corner, stood on the chair. The room's ceiling was low enough so that he had to hunch his head over to get it in between the rafters. He reached above his head, put his hands on the door and pushed upward.

The door suddenly let go. Steve pushed it aside, put his hands on one of the rafters at the side of the opening and pulled himself up and onto the roof. He crouched there only long enough to drag the door back into place. Just before he pushed it across the opening he heard Stewart James say in awe, "Hell, he was his old man's spittin' image right then! What the hell come over him?"

Steve turned, crouching, and looked along the roofs of the buildings on up the street. Some were flat, others peaked and lost in shadow. He got to his feet and walked to the edge of the office-roof. He jumped the four-foot passageway that ran between it and the adjoining building, getting a toe-hold on the gutter and crawling up until he had come to the ridge and then down the far side. The next roof was flat, almost flush against its neighbor. As Steve moved across it a six-gun set up a staccatto roar of sound from the street in back of him. That would be the men in the sheriff's office attracting the guard's attention. Almost immediately the shots were answered by two more from ahead that were muffled by the wide wooden awning in front of the hardware-store.

Steve went on, crossed one roof, another. Then he was across the roof of the building next to the hardware-store; and there he stopped. He had forgotten one thing, than a ten-foot wagon-drive ran between the hardware-store and the restaurant.

HE JUDGED the distance, stepped back along the restaurant roof to its far edge. Then, gathering his muscles for a quick lunge, he ran the four long strides across the roof and jumped. And as he gave that final spring he felt the weight at his thigh suddenly go slack. In a split-second he realized that the force of his jump had lifted the six-gun from its holster. He reached out frantically while still in mid-air and his fingers grazed the falling weapon in a futile gesture.

He landed hard, going to his knees, hearing the weapon clatter to the hard ground of the alleyway below. But the most ominous thing was that the gunfire along the street had momentarily quieted. And he knew that the guard down there around the store's front corner must have heard the sound of the falling six-gun.

Two seconds later he was sure that the guard had heard. For a man's voice out front called something unintelligible and was answered by another muffled voice from inside. By that time Steve was standing alongside the dust-fogged skylight, looking down into Belden's store.

In the fleeting instant he hesitated, he had a clear picture of what lay below. He could see a wide rectangle of the floor at the room's center. Directly beneath the skylight stood two-foot spools of rope, piled as high as a man's head alongside one of the timber pillars that supported the roof. On the far side of the pillar lay Sam Belden, his arms bound tight to his sides and his legs tied with a length of his own new quarter-inch rope; his face was livid, bruised, and a dirty rag had been stuffed into his mouth as a gag. Near his head lay the spool from which the rope had been cut. Two feet beyond his boots, Steve could make out a line of cast-iron kitchen-ranges, lined evenly for display.

Sam Belden's head was turned so

that he faced the far wall, and Steve realized that with one man in front and another in the alley out back, the store-owner must be watching the third outlaw. Even as he paused by the skylight, he could hear the dull thud of a crowbar striking against the bank's brick wall.

That sound along with the guard's call from the street, made Steve hurry as he lifted a boot and kicked out two sections of the sash. And as the glass fell and the broken shards crashed to the floor, Steve jumped through the opening. letting himself fall squarely toward the piled rope-spools below. It was a twelve foot drop.

His boots struck the top spool obliquely, so that his legs went from under him and he fell outward. But his fall had been broken; as he turned his muscles for the jolt of striking the bare floor, a gun's explosion filled the room's barnlike confines with bursting sound. A searing pain creased Steve's back muscles. His knees buckled under him and he rolled over twice before he came to his feet again.

For a split-second he was exposed and facing the outlaw who crouched before a slanting heap of brick rubble along the far wall, beneath a high row of filled shelves. The man was huge-statured, with a knotty pair of shoulders and long thick-muscled arms. His face was covered with a beard-stubble and as he swung his six-gun into line with Steve a sneer contorted his ugly face.

Steve threw himself across the four feet that separated him from the first of the half-dozen heavy ranges lining the side aisle beyond the skylight. As he moved the outlaw's forty-five blasted the momentary silence once more. A split-second before the explosion, Steve's left boot caught in the loose end of the rope stretched out from the wooden spool alongside Sam Belden; he fell, and that fall saved his life.

Finally, pushing to his knees and breathless from the fall that had knocked his wind out of him, he saw that for the moment he was safe. Two hundred pounds of cast-iron lay between him and the outlaw. He reached back to disentangle the rope from his boots, and as his hand closed on the hemp a wild idea crossed his mind. He had accepted the losing of his six-gun stoically and in a way different from that of a man who was in the habit of carrying one.

He pulled the rope toward him, until forty feet of it lay coiled at his feet. He took his clasp-knife from his pocket and cut the rope just as the outlaw thumbed a shot that sent a lead slug ringing into the back of the range.

As the echoes of the gun-blast died out, the outlaw's voice boomed, "Flint! Get in here, Flint!"

"How the hell can I?" the guard at the front door shouted back. "They're closin' in on me!"

AS IF to bear out his words, the shooting from down-street started again. James and Redwold and Delaney were evidently doing their best to distract the attention of the guard in front, who now returned a regularly spaced volley of shots.

As the shooting finally died out, the guard called in through the doorway, "You still there, Benson?"

There was no answer. The outlaw by the far wall was too wary to give away his position by the sound of his voice. In the past few seconds Steve had tied a slip-knot in the end of the rope. As he worked he peered along the crowded aisles of the room. Finally, toward the front and well out of line with the outlaw's guns, he caught a glimpse of Mary Belden's head and shoulders and breathed a gusty sigh of relief. She was bound in the same man-

ner as her father and lying behind a bulky stand on which were arranged bins that held an assortment of nails.

In his fall through the skylight and on that dash in behind the line of ranges, Steve had gotten a clear picture of the outlaw and the place where he crouched. Directly over the outlaw's head and abutting the party wall to the bank, a long shelf was suspended by hangers from the ceiling-joists. Looking obliquely upward now, Steve could see the shelf, which was stacked high with an assortment of three gallon pails, lidded garbage-buckets, baled spades and empty gallon coal-oil cans.

The hangers that supported the shelf were of half inch boards and their ends hung below the line of the shelf to support the nailed cross-brackets. It was the nearest half-foot length of board sticking below the shelf that Steve now eyed.

The rope was stiff but Steve shook out a two-foot loop at its end; and with the length of the rope coiled in his left hand he rose to a crouching position and spun the loop. He threw it accurately, jerking it at precisely the right instant to tighten the loop on the bracket. Then, throwing his weight against the taut rope, he pulled as hard as he could.

The shelf swayed outward, the boards creaking. Suddenly under his weight, the end hanger tore loose from the ceiling-joists and the shelf fell. The pails and buckets and shovels tipped outward and hit the floor with a deafening clatter. And as the noise broke out, Steve lifted a heavy cast-iron stove-lid from the range with the lid-lifter. He straightened to his full height to see the last heavy garbage-bucket fall to hit the outlaw, now on his knees amid the litter, a glancing blow on the shoulder.

Steve threw the stove-lid just as the outlaw clawed and kicked his way free of the jumble of galvanized-iron pails and buckets. The lid caught him full in the stomach, driving the breath from his lungs in a gasp. Before he could straighten from that, Steve had thrown two more stove lids. The first caught the outlaw on the shins, made him howl with pain; and the second struck his right upper-arm and knocked it to one side, so that the gun, now levelled, sent its exploding shot almost straight down and into the floor.

As he threw that last stove-lid, Steve lunged from behind the protection of the range. Twenty feet separated him from the outlaw now. He ran past the spot where Sam Belden lay, and on his way his left hand scooped up the heavy rope-spool and he heaved it on ahead of him as he closed in on the outlaw. The man swivelled up his six-gun, fired. But the whirling heavy wooden spool caught the bullet. A second later the spool, hit him full in the chest and knocked him back off his feet.

Lying on his back, the outlaw swung his weapon into line again. Steve was close now and he kicked hard and his boot caught the outlaw's wrist and sent the weapon spinning away. As the man groaned in pain, he rolled to one side and onto his feet. He straightened into the stiff uppercut of Steve's fist; that fist had started its travel at Steve's knees and had the hundred and eighty pounds of his weight behind it. It lifted the outlaw back off his feet and snapped his head against the brick wall. The whites of his eyes rolled around in a blank stare, his knees gave way and he slumped to the floor, senseless.

THE hinges of the door far back along the room squeaked to betray the presence of the third outlaw, coming in from the alley. He called softly, "That you, Benson?" at the moment Steve snatched up the unconscious outlaw's forty-five.

Steve soundlessly walked ten feet

back along the room and in behind the high wheels of a new red and yellow-painted cultivator. He couldn't see the man at the back of the room but could hear his stealthy boot-tread; then a second later the outlaw called sharply, "Flint! What's happened to Benson?"

The screen of the front-door slammed. Flint answered: "There's someone in here, Mordue! Watch it! I think he got Benson."

After that the silence dragged out interminably. Steve's ears didn't pick up any sound but the muffled thunder of four stacatto shots from down the street in the direction of the jail. He guessed that the two outlaws could see each other across the length of the store, that perhaps one had given the signal that would mean their closing in on him.

He hastily reloaded the six-gun with fresh loads from his belt, filling all six chambers. Then, as quietly as he could, he ducked under the wheel of the cultivator and crawled in beneath its angling steel seat. Beneath the seat was a tool box. The hinges of the box worked stiffly; but at last it came open and he lifted out of it half a dozen tools wired together.

Crawling clear of the machine, he looked hastily forward and back along the narrow aisle. No one was in sight. He threw the tools as hard as he could toward the front plate-glass window to the left of the door.

The glass crashed outward in a riot of sound. And with that sound Steve came erect, facing the rear of the store. The outlaw back there stood to his left, close in to the back counter, his gaze riveted on the windows; he was tense, cocked, and each of his hands fisted a short-barreled Colt's.

Some instinct warned him to look Steve's way a split- second later. His guns came arcing up and into line in a blast of gun-flame and exploding sound. Steve thumbed back the hammer of his own weapon as a hard blow took him squarely in the right shoulder. He rocked the forty-five into position again and triggered two thought-fast shots at the outlaw, never thinking that he was aiming by instinct from the hip.

As the outlaw's spare frame jerked convulsively and slammed back into the counter behind him, an explosion cut loose from the front of the store. Blended with it was the high whine of the bullet ricochetting from the shining blaze of a scoop-shovel which hung from the ceiling; the shovel was in line with Steve and had miraculously protected his back.

Steve wheeled at the sound and unknowingly stepped from behind his cover. Feet spread, body bent at the waist, he stood against the hail of lead from the outlaw's twin guns; and as he answered it he was remembering that he had once heard his father say, "Take your time, plenty of it, when you're throwin' lead. Only don't take too much!"

He took his time, strangely enough unshaken as a bullet scorched the flesh along his ribs at his left side. His first shot ended the snarl of lead cutting past him. For that first shot made the outlaw stagger, take a backward step. And each time he tried to lift his weapons into line after that first shot one of Steve's bullets would again tilt him off-balance.

Steve felt the six-gun buck against his palm four times. The fifth time he triggered the weapon the only sound that reached him was the metallic click of the hammer falling against an empty shellcase.

But that last try had been a bet he had made with himself. He had wanted, calculatingly, to see if he could hit the outlaw's stooped-over body once more before it toppled face-down onto the floor. And the click of the hammer

told him that he would have made it.

The outlaw fell beyond one of the side-aisle counters, out of sight. A sudden nausea hit Steve and he stepped weakly backward to lean against the cultivator-wheel. His shoulder hurt him now and the store's length was wheeling before his eyes in a pit of dizziness. He shut out the vision, trying to steady himself.

In the next ten seconds he dimly heard the cries and shouts from the street, the squeak of the door-hinges up front. That caused him to open his eyes again and look toward the front of the room.

STEWART JAMES and Redwold and Delaney were standing just inside the door. Bill James, his face pale and drawn in an expression akin to fear, was standing with his back to the door, behind his father, keeping the crowd out. Redwold, a six-gun in his hand, looked down at the fallen outlaw along the front counter and said significantly, "I won't need this," and holstered his weapon.

"There's Crawford," Delaney said, and led the way quickly back toward Steve. But on the way they found first Mary Belden and then her father and paused long enough to cut loose the ropes that bound them and lift them to their feet.

"Someone send for Doc Monroe!" James called when he was close enough to see the blood smearing Steve's shirt-sleeve. Then he was facing Steve, Mary alongside him, saying, "Steve, from up front I'd have sworn you were your old man."

"I'm not sure it isn't Phil Crawford," Sam Belden put in, his voice thick from his swollen tongue. "You should have seen it! The way he waded into those three! Hell, I'll have to tell you about it later," he ended abruptly, at a loss for words and with the glance he gave Steve filled with admiration.

They carried Steve to Doc Monroe's house instead of bringing the medico to the store. The next day, after Mrs. Crawford had gone home to leave the nursing job to Mary Belden, the old sawbones came into Steve's room with a look of devilment in his eyes. He glanced first at Mary, who sat on the edge of the bed, then at his patient.

"You've got a fine mother, Steve," he said. "Only she's got the same ideas she had when your old man was totin' a law badge. That is, she had 'em until a minute ago."

Steve pushed up off the pillows, even though it made him wince to move. "She . . . you mean she's changed?"

The sawbones nodded. "What I said to her was, 'Look here, Mrs. Crawford. Steve looks like Phil, talks like him, and Sam Belden swears he fights like him.

" 'And when he gets strong enough to keep a deputy's badge from makin' his shoulders sag, he's goin' to have that much more in common with his father. Now does it make sense for you to carry on this way?' "

"And what did she say?" Steve asked.

"That you were Mary's look-out from now on, not hers."

GET YOUR SHARE OF UNITED STATES BONDS and STAMPS!
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By NORRELL GREGORY

A raid on those Captain boys might cut down the pick-branding, but it'd likely stir up a sight of hot lead throwing!

It was Ed Captain, all right, him and his deadly six-gun!

DAVE STOBIE heard the calf bawl in the quakers somewhere off to his right. It was a scared bawl, cut off short. He left his Rowdy horse, took his rifle and went pushing through the shoulder-high columbines as stealthily as a wolf.

Sweat beaded the fuzz on his upper lip and these columbines barely stirred as his gangling bigness went through them. He knew that if this was one of the Captain brothers, especially the little one, Ed, he had better be careful. Ed was a tough customer and would shoot first then look at what he had shot later.

The quakers thinned out and a sort of park opened before him. Out there a wiry, quick moving little man had a short yearling down and was pick-branding him. It was Ed Captain, the little one.

Dave knew this calf must be one that had come after branding time last year and missed the iron. At this time of year with the long coat of winter hair

beginning to slip it was easy to pick brand an unbranded animal and the brand could be made to look like the real thing. Of course it wouldn't last long, but it might last long enough for somebody to claim the calf, or cause trouble.

Dave knew better than to bust out there and yell at Ed. Ed's rifle was in easy reach of his hand and he was quick as a steel trap. The range was practically point-blank for a 30-30 so Dave held a little high on Ed's hat crown and let drive. The hat jumped high into the air, but no higher than Ed himself jumped. Dave kept right on shooting and Ed kept right on jumping—towards his horse. He hit the saddle just as Dave levered in his last cartridge. Dave sent it close enough for Ed to hear it then near laughed himself down at the way Ed went streaking low through the timber.

The calf by that time had loosened the rope and was about to get away. Dave made a lunge for it because he wanted to see what brand Ed had been picking out. The calf eluded him and went away from there faster even than Ed Captain had. Dave had a glimpse of the brand, however.

He was down in the Dutchman valley, nearly home when he met Kirk Overbay, boss of Ben Ubelar's outfit. Overbay was an overbearing, squared chinned man about thirty, so full of nervous energy that he couldn't sit still on a standing horse. He stopped now and fiddled with the tie strings of his saddle until Dave could come up.

Usually he treated Dave like he was about fifteen years old, calling him "bud," "kid," or other such names. Now he studied Dave with his raking look and addressed him confidentially.

"Stobie, we're going to make a raid on the Captain boys one of these nights. You and Buck want in on it?"

Dave knew it was dangerous to refuse such an invitation outright.

"Along about when?" he asked.

Overbay pushed the words out of his mouth corner. "Tomorrow night. We'll look for one or both of you over."

"I'll tell Buck but I doubt if we can make it."

"Suit yourself," Overbay replied coldly and rode on.

Dave lined out for home then because he wanted to attend the Saturday night dance over in town. There he turned Rowdy into the corral and rambled on to the cabin where Buck Stobie, his step-father, was sewing a rip in a rusty pair of boots with waxed thread and boar bristles.

Buck Stobie was near fifty years old but he didn't have a white hair in his black head nor a wrinkle on his tanned face. He was big and rangy like Dave, but dark. Dave's skin would peel if mistreated, but it wouldn't tan. Now Buck reached down and bit off that stout linen thread as close and clean as a knife could have cut it. Felt around inside the boot to see if he had left any loops or knots inside.

"What was that shootin' I heard up yonder?"

"Well sir, I just cold-caught Ed Captain pick-brandin' a short yearling."

BUCK said disgustedly, "And couldn't hit him with a full magazine!"

"Didn't try to hit him. But I made him jump higher than any fall buck, the scan'drel."

"He ever finds out who made him jump and it'll be Sally-shut-the-door for you. What brand was he pickin' out?"

"Well sir, if I ain't as close-eyed as a badger, it was Lon Sterling's brand."

Buck just held the boot and stared at that. "You don't reckon Lon has got them low-down thieves workin' for him, do you?"

"They might have it in for Lon," Dave replied. "I'd sooner think

that. I met Kirk Overbay too. He told me they was going to be a raid against the Captain boys tomorrow night. What you reckon he told *me* about that for?"

"To test you out," said Buck darkly. "He's been tryin' to brand us as nesters ever since he got that U Bar boss job. Where you headed?" he asked as Dave started scraping at his face with a bone handled razor.

"Dance. Might catch me a girl. Expect Nancy Ubelar will be there."

Buck rocked back and roared.

"Boy, you do sight high! Old Ben spends more on one dress for that girl than you ever packed at one time."

"She's a right sweet girl," Buck sloshed cold water over his scraped face. It looked like it had been par-boiled. Then he shrugged into a bright green shirt, tight blue trousers, new boots and topped it off with a tall grey Stetson. Even Buck grunted approval.

"Better watch the shoulder seams of that shirt. Way you're spreadin' out, I'll soon have a time dirtyin' your back."

"You'd have a time dirtying it right now."

"You take off that green shirt and I'll mighty quick show you 'bout that."

Dave just grinned. Some day he knew he'd have to pile Buck hard to make him quit bantering him for a wrestle.

It was dark when he dismounted in the shaft of light before the dance hall. The dance was already in progress. He tied Rowdy next to a team of matched blacks hooked to a yellow wheeled buggy. That was Lon Sterling's rig, the only yellow wheeled buggy in those parts.

As the head of the stairs he stopped and watched the dancers swirl by. Lon Sterling was there, dancing with Nancy Ubelar. They sure made a fine pair, Lon with his fine build and good looks and Nancy in a blue silk dress that was just the shade of her eyes. It certainly didn't detract from her looks any. She had light, wavy hair and she was so light on her feet she just seemed to float.

Dave watched them dance around the hall. Nancy saw his head sticking up over there and waved at him. Lon saw him too, and when the dance stopped, Dave motioned for him to come over. Lon refused with a vulgar gesture and Dave motioned again. Finally Lon came.

He was short, "Well, what is it, Dave?"

"I caught Ed Captain pick-branding your brand on a short yearlin' today."

Lon swore robustly.

"If I was you," Dave continued, "I'd sure get over there and see them boys. If that gimlet-eyed Overbay was to spot that brand, and claim it for a U Bar animal he could cause you a lot of trouble, Lon."

"What horse you riding?"

"Rowdy. He's tied next to your rig."

"Mind if I take him?"

"Help yourself."

"If I don't get back, will you take Nancy home in my rig?"

Dave grinned broadly. "I'll shore do that, Lon."

"I'll pick up my rig at your place. Don't tell Nancy where I've gone."

He was off then and when Dave corralled Nancy for a dance the first thing she said was, "Where did Lon go?"

"He had to leave for a while. He deputized me to take you home, though."

SHE was peeved and showed it. Dave couldn't tell whether it was because she had to go home with him, or because she didn't like being run out on.

"It must be terribly important," she said.

"Well, I don't know how Lon feels

about it, but if I had brought you it couldn't be that important."

"I'll bet you just fixed up a fib to get rid of Lon, Dave!"

Dave just grinned. "Could be."

But Nancy seemed to have lost interest in the dance. She kept prying at Dave, trying to find out where Lon had gone and making it tough for Dave to answer. He was glad when she told him she wanted to go home.

It wasn't the sort of ride Dave had anticipated with her in Lon's new buggy. Her mind seemed to stick with Lon Sterling. Dave was relieved when he let her out at her home and turned homeward himself.

He tied the blacks before the cabin where Lon could find them easily and turned in. Buck was snoring away in the back room of the cabin. Dave raised the window by his bed and piled in.

It was just coming day when he awoke and heard a horse coming down the valley just batting the earth. He could tell it was Rowdy by the way he hit the ground and he cussed Lon Sterling for needlessly stoving up a good horse. Lon always rode like a drunk Ute.

He heard Lon pull to a sliding stop out there, then Lon's voice:

"Dave—you awake?"

Dave reared up and stuck his head out the window. He was so drugged with sleep and the light was so poor he could scarcely see anything.

"How'd you come out, Lon?" he asked drowsily and let his head rest on the window sill.

The answer was a lick of red flame from a gun muzzle. Lon Sterling wasn't fooling when he threw that shot. He aimed to blow Dave's head off, and only the fact that Dave let his head droop at the instant the shot came, saved his life.

There was the vicious *whoooop* of a buggy whip, the snort of a horse then Lon Sterling was gone with a rising rumble of buggy wheels.

In the leanto Buck Stobie hit the floor a mighty thump with bare feet.

"Goddelmighty!" he ejaculated and hopped into the main room holding up his drawers with one hand, pawing his mane of hair out of his eyes with the other.

He saw Dave stretched senseless across the window sill with his head hanging out and yanked him back with one jerk. Slung him across the bed and ran his hand over Dave's head. Cursed bitterly at the sticky feel of blood.

Dave was out for a few minutes. When he came to, Buck was wrapping his head in a towel and still cussing.

"What happened—what happened?"

Dave's head was still spinning. "All I know is Lon Sterling just plain cut down on me."

Buck jerked his head up and held it in a listening attitude. "Lay right where you are," he said ominously, then reached down a rifle from the wall hooks and smashed a cartridge into the chamber.

Dave thought at first Buck was going after Lon and he was about to tell him to wait when he heard what Buck had already heard—horses coming, fast.

Riders came with a rush and reined up outside. Somebody called harshly, "Buck! Come out here!"

Buck pulled open the door and stood there with the rifle cradled in his arm. With his black hair on end, his white drawers sort of sagging down and that rifle he must have looked plenty tough to the half dozen U Bar riders facing him.

"Where's Dave?" It was Kirk Overbay that flung the question at him.

Buck yawned but it wasn't because he felt sleepy.

"That boy is twenty one. He went

to a dance last night—"

Overbay snapped, "You're lying—"

Big Buck just tipped the muzzle of the rifle up and shot from the crook of his arm. The muzzle wasn't more than six feet from Overbay and the powder blast almost knocked Overbay out of the saddle. He reeled, clawed at his eyes and yelled:

"Kill that crazy old fo——"

THE rifle spoke again and Overbay yelped with terror. Not a man facing Buck moved so much as a finger.

"Drive on!" Buck's voice was harsh. "Drive on or I'll just plain quit practicin' on ye!"

They rode on and Dave slid off the bed. Buck stood in the door and stared towards the corral where Dave's Rowdy horse stood with hanging head and heaving sides.

"Did Lon Sterling go out to see them Captain boys last night, Dave?"

Dave nodded. "He took my Rowdy horse and I drove his rig out here."

"Well, I bet ten dollars to a barley straw Overbay raided 'em and caught Lon there and figured he was *you.*" Buck pointed to Dave's horse, "They couldn't help seein' that horse with his sides agoing like a sage hen's wings."

Dave said, "But Overbay said the raid was to be *tonight,* not last night."

Buck replied darkly. "I bet that low-down hound figured you would ride over to warn them Captains and he just told you that to trap you."

Dave said thickly, "If I was shore of that I'd plain go after him right now!"

"I'm goin' up to see what did happen at the Captains' hangout."

"I'll go too. Lon just barely creased me."

"He thinks you sent him out there on purpose to git caught like he did, Dave."

Dave realized that was about the size of it. Buck voiced his unspoken thoughts when Buck said:

"That means that Lon was shore workin' *with* them low-down Captain boys, Dave."

"It ain't been proved, Buck."

When they arrived at the Captain brother's hangout they found the cabin a smouldering heap of ruins and the ground all about the place was littered with rifle and six-shooter cartridge cases.

"Looks like they had a hell-for-shore fight, Dave."

"Reckon anybody got away besides Lon?"

Buck sniffed the smoke from the ember heap. "Well I plain-know both of them didn't. That ain't burnt wood smell."

Dave began scouting around. The cabin had been built close to the river bank. He found where somebody had dug out under the back wall of the cabin and dragged himself into the water. Called Buck over and showed him the blood sign.

"Here's what I figure happened, Dave. Overbay and his bunch set the place afire to smoke 'em out. Lon made a run for it on your horse, he was over there in the timber," Buck pointed. "I found a heap of shells there. When he run for it he drawed them after him and one of the Captains got out this way. You take one bank and I'll take the other'n and we'll see if we can find out where the blamed scamp come out of the river."

The river was shallow enough here to allow them to ride straight up the bed. They followed it until the banks pinched in and grew so steep and rocky a goat could hardly have gotten out.

Buck stopped. "Must have gone *down.*"

"There's an old bridge up here where that old pack road used to cross," Dave said. "Mebby he was makin' for that."

They pushed on until they came in

sight of the old bridge which had spanned the river gulch with one clear jump. The center span was gone now and just the ends, anchored on the solid stone abutments, remained. Bushes and weeds grew around the abutments so they were thoroughly screened.

Buck stopped and eyed the place with a foreboding eye.

"As soon walk in on a blind rattler as one of them scamps," he declared. "Specially if it's the little one, Ed, and wounded."

Dave dismounted, got down on his hands and knees and started to crawl up through the bushes towards the south abutment. Buck stopped him quick.

"That ain't no way to do it." Then he raised his voice, "Ed! We ain't after you! This's Buck Stobie. Come out—we want to talk to you!"

No answer. Dave said impatiently, "I'm going in."

"Be shore that you see him before he does you!" Buck warned. "Wait. I'll move up and go in from a different angle. We'll get the booger bunkered."

THEIR caution was needless. Ed Captain was there, lying close up against the abutment, but he was unconscious, a bullet hole through him that appalled even Buck.

"He lived tough and looks like he'll die tough," Buck said soberly. "What'll we do about him, Dave?"

"I'll stay here with him. You go back down and find out how the land lays. Might bring up some grub and blankets when you come back."

After Buck had left Dave gathered some spruce boughs and with his saddle blanket made a couch for Ed Captain. There wasn't much he could do about the wound except wash it and put wet compresses on the two holes. The tenacity with which the man clung to life was something to admire.

It was near sundown before Ed showed any signs of consciousness and the first sound he made was an appeal for water. Dave supplied him from his hat, spilling more on the outside than Ed swallowed. It seemed to revive him amazingly, but the minute he realized where he was Dave saw him sort of close up. Just lay and stared at Dave with hard eyes and tight mouth.

Shortly after dark Buck came back with a big bundle of supplies and bad news.

"That low-down Overbay is braggin' about how he trapped you, Dave. He told you that raid was to be tonight, instead of last night on purpose. Ain't a man with him but what seen and knowed your horse."

Dave said thickly, "I'd just plain like to get that hoolihan hemmed up with nothing in his fists but his fingers!"

"They figure both the Captain boys burned up in the cabin. Seems like old Ben Ubelar didn't know anything about the raid till it was over. Now he's madder than any of them at you."

"You seen Lon Sterling?"

"I aim to see him tomorrow, but I don't reckon it will do any good. How's Ed?"

"He's come to himself but he won't say anything."

"And he *won't* say anything either. I know that breed. Well, I brung you some grub and blankets. Way things are I expect you'd better stay right here for the present. I'll be back tomorrow night."

Dave lugged the bundle of stuff under the bridge and fixed himself a bunk. He could look straight up and see a few stars through the cracks in the old bridge floor. This place would be all right until it rained.

The next thing he knew it was daylight and Ed Captain was gone. Dave could hardly believe his eyes at first.

He found Ed where he had dragged himself down to the water edge and couldn't get back. He picked him up and carried him back under the bridge. Ed's eyes were bright with fever and his face sort of puffed.

"Don't you do that no more," Dave told him. "Reckon I can get you water when you want it."

Ed wanted water that day, a lot of it. It kept Dave pretty busy keeping him supplied. He washed Ed' wound again and put on some fresh bandages. Towards evening Ed dropped into a sort of coma.

Buck came again after dark with more bad news.

"I seen Lon," he explained. "The low-down dog claims he wasn't near Captain's place. When I told him you was tryin' to help him he just laughed at me. There ain't no question, Dave but what Lon Sterling was payin' the Captain boys to do that pick brandin'. With Lon's stuff runnin' on the same winter range as Ben Ubelar's, that pick-branded stuff would get by in the spring cut and Lon could hot-brand it before he put it out on his summer range."

"It ain't been proved," Dave said stubbornly.

"No, and it won't never be proved now, with Ab Captain dead and Ed the same as. I know them cusses. They won't ever talk."

"What do they figure about me?"

"They figure you've done skipped the country. But don't you give up, Dave. I'll stick by you till the hair slips."

"Buck, I shore appreciate the way you've stuck by me."

"Why blast it, boy, I couldn't think any more of you if you was my own blood and bone." He gripped Dave's arm hard. "Well, if we have to skip out, we can do it. This ain't the only cowpasture in Amerikay."

After Buck had gone Dave had a lump in his throat. Buck was a sure-nuff real man. Dave got to wondering if this blood stuff wasn't mostly bunk after all. If it wasn't living with kids that made parents think so much of them, and *vice-versa*.

AS HE was fixing his bed for the night Ed Captain's voice came out of the darkness.

"Figure it will rain before long."

"Feelin' better, ain't you, Ed?"

"I've digested worse pills than this. Figure I can ride out of here most any time now."

"Where to?"

"That's my business."

"You wouldn't had no business if I hadn't shot high the day I caught you pick-brandin' that short yearling. Who was payin' you to do that, Ed?"

"That's my business."

Dave got sore. "You know all I got to do is let Overbay know where you are and you won't ride no place, ever?"

"Why don't you do it?"

Dave gave him up. It didn't matter anyhow. Unless Lon Sterling just plain come out and told how things was, he never could make Ben Ubelar believe that it wasn't him at the Captain's place the night of the raid.

Next morning Ed Captain was hungry. He ate an astonishing breakfast for a man in his shape, and even managed to get down to the water on his own power and back.

"It'll rain before night," he predicted. "Too tormented hot."

Dave went up and shifted Rowdy's picket. He didn't have to picket the house to keep him from leaving, but he didn't want Rowdy straying too far. If one of Ubelar's riders was to see Rowdy it would be a dead give away.

About midafternoon a low mutter of thunder rolled through Powder Gap.

"Told you," said Ed Captain.

Dave picked up his saddle. "Reckon I'd better get Rowdy saddled in case we have to boil out of here in a hurry. Could you stick a horse?"

"I'll just plain have to if we get run out of here."

Dave saddled Rowdy and tied him to a bush at the end of the bridge above their camp. He was standing there watching the clouds boil through the Gap and thinking that this wasn't going to be just a rain, but a regular washout, when Rowdy neighed and pointed his nose down river.

Dave spun about and there come Nancy Ubelar, riding up the bed of the stream with her eyes fixed ahead. Dave whistled and motioned for her to ride up out of the river to where he stood. She did and slipped off her horse and stood facing him, her face deep-troubled.

"I made Buck tell me where you were," she explained. "Dave, you didn't send Lon out to the Captain's place just to get him into trouble, did you?"

"I sure-to-goodness didn't, Nancy."

"He thinks you did. He says you was jealous. I——"

A splintering crash of thunder drowned the rest of her talk and rain drops as big as doorknobs splatted on the rocks. Dave tied her horse fast and hustled her down the bank under the bridge.

"We're in for it," he said.

She saw Ed Captain sitting there with his back against the abutment and recoiled, for Ed was enough to scare a person, with his bony colorless face and his big, hunted eyes.

"Who's that?" Nancy exclaimed.

"That's Ed Captain, Nancy."

The roar of the approaching cloudburst stopped further talk. The remnant of the old bridge reeled and shook as tons of water hit it with a sort of rumbling thunder. Solid sheets poured through the cracks and in no time at all the three of them were literally drowned and gasping for breath. The next thing the river was looking them right in the face.

"We got to get out of here!" said Dave.

He picked up Ed Captain and carried him up where the horses stood humped against the sheeting torrents, Nancy following. There they huddled until the first fury of the cloudburst had passed and the rain settled to a steady downpour that showed no sign of relenting.

Ed Captain looked pretty rocky and Dave decided that if this didn't kill him, nothing would. The soaking didn't hurt Nancy's looks a bit.

"We got to go in," Dave said.

ED NODDED and Nancy looked relieved. So Dave put Ed in Rowdy's saddle and started down out of there, leading Rowdy, Nancy following on her horse.

Once Ed said, "How you figure on crossin' the river—if you do?"

"I'm figuring," Dave replied.

He kept slogging right on down country until it began to get dark. When he stopped they were down out of the rough section and looking across the now roistering river. Over there the roof of a building was barely visible through the rain and dusk.

Dave pointed, "There's our cabin. We got to either swim the river here or go down ten miles to the bridge and ten miles back. It's up to you folks."

Ed Captain said, "It wouldn't be the first river I've swum."

Dave looked at Nancy. She said, "If you think it's safe I'm ready to try it, Dave. I couldn't be any wetter."

"Pile off then," Dave told her. "I'll take Ed across first."

Nancy dismounted and Dave put Ed on her horse. He wanted Rowdy under

him in case anything should go wrong.

Ed said, "Take some tall swimmin' to make that shelf over there."

"We'll get a running start."

They rode back a few rods from the steep bank, turned, then came at it full tilt. Dave saw Nancy throw her arms over her eyes as they curved out and down. They hit, went under, came up with the horses swimming strongly. Ed Captain didn't seem bothered at all. Dave knew it was old stuff for him.

They made the shelf he was aiming at easily and the horses scrambled out. Ed dismounted then and Dave took the horse in tow and went up river a ways to recross after Nancy.

He crossed without incident and jogged down to where Nancy waited. Noticed she seemed nervous as he helped her mount.

"It ain't near as bad as it looks," he said. "You just stick to the saddle and leave the reins alone. "We'll be across in a jiffy."

Again the ride back and again the dash for the bank. Dave heard her squeal as they dropped, but she took the plunge like a veteran. Turned to laugh at him as they came up and the horses lined out for the far bank.

It was nearly dark down on the river surface then, and Dave did not see the small log until it was too late.

He was on the lower side and the log, it wasn't more than ten inches through, struck Nancy's horse on the flat of his jaw. He snorted and jerked his head up and the log dropped down and fouled his reins and jerked his nose under.

Horse panic hit him and he began to plunge and snort. Dave made a grab at Nancy and got her just as the horse went completely under. Then Dave swung Rowdy down stream to avoid a mixup with the panicked horse, slipped out of the saddle and caught Rowdy's tail.

"Just keep chokin' that saddle horn," he called to Nancy. "We'll make it all right."

They had already been swept below the shelf but Dave knew they could get out lower down. Ed Captain probably did not know this, for he ran shambling downstream and threw himself down on the bank where the heft of the current set in. By extending himself to the utmost he could just reach down and grab Nancy. Dave didn't know what he was about until it was too late. Looking back as they swept on he saw Ed slowly draw Nancy up on the bank and knew what that lift cost the man.

He made a safe shoring farther down and went pounding up the bank. It was almost dark then, too dark to see faces.

Nancy said with chattering teeth, "I'll walk to your place, Dave."

Ed Captain said nothing. Dave had to lift him on Rowdy's back and hold him there afterward.

No light showed at the cabin. Dave lifted Ed off and kicked in the door. Put Ed on the bunk in the leanto, then went back into the main room to make a light.

Nancy was standing in the middle of a spreading pool of water, her teeth chattering like castinets.

DAVE swept some of his clothing down from a wall hook and tossed them at her.

"Put them on while I tend to Ed," he said, and took the light into the leanto and closed the door.

Ed's lips were blue. He didn't make a sound or a move while Dave stripped him and rolled him in a dry blanket. Then he opened his sunken eyes. By the look in them Dave knew Ed was done for.

He said, "You busted something when you pulled Nancy out, didn't you, Ed?"

"That's Ben Ubelar's girl, ain't it?"

Dave nodded.

"I want to see her. Now."

Dave rapped on the door. Nancy said, "All right, Dave."

"Ed wants to see you."

Her eyes widened. *"Me?"*

Dave explained. "He got shot in that raid. This wettin' has about finished him. Sort of a dyin' man's whim."

She didn't hesitate after that. Dave closed the door and proceeded to rip off his own soggy clothing. He was pulling dry trousers on in the dark when he heard a horse stop outside. If there had been more than one horse he would have been suspicious, but since there was but one he figured it was Buck, back after a fruitless trip up to the hideout.

He was hurrying to get into his clothes before Nancy should open the leanto door and he had his shirt over his head and was poking his arms through the sleeves when the front door opened. At the same time Nancy opened the leanto door and Dave saw who it was. Overbay.

Overbay couldn't see Dave's face because of the shirt, but he could see Nancy. Dave saw his mouth go mean with suspicion and he thought, *If I uncover my head the cuss will plain throw down on me when he sees it ain't Buck, so what'll I do?*

Overbay settled it by stepping through the door and closing it. He ignored Dave and spoke to Nancy.

"Wait till Ben hears about this!"

Dave saw his chance then. He slipped the shirt off and with the same motion grabbed Overbay's gun. Overbay spun towards Dave and Dave stepped back and grinned.

"You told me a low-down lie, Overbay, he said. "I promised I would pay you for that if I ever got you cornered. Well I plain got you cornered now."

It was a savage brutal fight while it lasted. Overbay fought to disable and he was a strong, active man. Dave fought only to punish, and he certainly accomplished what he set out to do.

As Overbay went flying out of the cabin Buck rode up and dismounted. He paused to help Overbay to his feet and administer a hearty parting kick before entering the cabin.

"Well sir, if we never get anything else out of this, Dave, but that, it's worth it. But that scand'rel will be back with Ben and the other boys."

Nancy said, "I hope he does!" Then she looked at Dave. Dave hadn't come out of the scrap unmarked.

"Why didn't you tell me the truth about Lon?" Nancy asked.

Dave pulled on his shirt. "Well, since I was responsible for Lon gettin' caught in that raid I didn't figure I had a right to talk."

"I tried to get you to tell me about it the night of the dance," she replied. "I knew something was wrong then."

BUCK looked at Dave, "Did that scand'rel Ed talk after all?"

Nancy said, "Yes he did, and he's not a *scand'rel!"* Then she began to cry.

Ed Captain was given a public funeral. Ben Ubelar not only paid for it, but attended, with Nancy. Afterward Ubelar drew Buck aside.

"I just wanted to tell you I had nothing to do with that raid. Overbay staged it without my knowledge."

"Conscience botherin' you, Ben?"

"I fired Overbay. Now I got to find somebody to take his place."

"Plenty of good men around, Ben."

Ubelar squirmed. "Do you reckon Dave could handle it?"

Buck was dumfounded. Then he noticed that Ubelar was watching Dave and Nancy, talking over there by Ubelar's rig. A light dawned on Buck. He could see Nancy's hand behind this.

"Ben," he replied, "I've raised that boy and I've never seen him bunkered."

Doc Hardy's Powdersmoke Prescription

By GUNNISON STEELE

Author of "Vengeance of the Colddeck Crew," etc.

If the stranger chose to go for a starpacker, it meant the hangnoose for Doc Hardy, but the tinhorn medico didn't figure he'd fallen so low yet that he'd bushwhack a man!

Smoke and powderflame lashed out, and a gunshot roared!

DOC HARDY had ridden ten hours with a lead pellet in his side, the pellet having been acquired when he was caught cheating in a stud poker game at Injun Jack's badlands whiskey station fifty miles to the south. But now Doc couldn't ride any farther. He was through, and he knew it.

Doc Hardy's lips quirked sardonically. "To die alone and unmourned on the open prairie," he murmured. "Truly, an inglorious end for one so accomplished."

Doc raised his head and drew the scented air into his lungs. It was spring, and the world was green and lush. Wild flowers smeared the prairie with red and green and golden colors; a bird was singing in a tree nearby. The world was

awakening to new, joyous life. . . . And Doc Hardy was about to die.

Doc's smile softened. Birds singing, bluebonnets rippling under a warm Texas sun—not even his ruined, embittered life had dulled his appreciation of these things. Once, Doc Hardy recalled, he had felt the elation of acclaim and achievement; once his slender fingers had been steady and clever with knife and scalpel, and he had known the thrill of giving life instead of taking it. But long since those gleaming instruments had been sold to get money for the whiskey his soul craved. The whiskey that had ruined him, had driven him, finally, to murder and into outlawry.

Up in the rough hills, yet thirty miles away, was the cabin of a renegade medico who could patch Doc Hardy up. Now Doc knew he could never reach the hills. His brain was reeling, and pain from his wounded side pulsed through his entire body. He was thirsty, burning with fever, and purple mist was slowly deepening in his brain. And he had begun to imagine he heard and saw things he knew didn't exist.

For instance, he imagined he saw a rider coming slowly toward him. It looked like a girl—a slim, redlipped girl with golden hair that gleamed in the sun. Doc grinned bitterly; he knew damn well this girl wasn't real. He'd look away, and when he looked back the girl would be gone.

Then a queer feeling came over Doc Hardy. The girl hadn't vanished. She was close now, and there was anxiety in her blue eyes as she looked at Doc. Then Doc knew she was real.

"An angel," Doc Hardy said softly. "Definitely, an angel from heaven!"

He doffed his hat, tried to bow courteously. But at the effort, blinding pain shot the length of his gaunt body and the world seemed to whirl crazily before his eyes. He felt small pain as he hit the ground—just a numbing jar, and a wild flash of lights before his eyes, then blackness. . . .

Then the blackness lifted a little, and Doc knew he was back on his horse. He could see nothing, but he knew he was slumped over the saddlehorn. He didn't feel any pain. He tried to lift his head, to see if the yellow-haired girl was still there, but again the pain came and the mist in his brain deepened.

Then Doc Hardy sensed that he was no longer on the horse. He was on a bed, and somebody was bending over him, and he heard voices. "It'd take too long to get a sawbones," he heard a voice say. "Heat some water, Marcia, while I sharpen up the butcher knife. This slug's got to come out."

NOW, Doc Hardy thought vaguely, he was about to die. He, whose slender fingers had been so deft and cunning with the instruments of his trade, must lie here helpless while clumsy, untrained hands sliced on him with a butcher knife!

Doc thought sardonically, "Truly, an ironic jest of the gods. Well, I had my life to live, and made a mess of it—but to die without even the solace of good whiskey. . . ."

His lips were forced open, and fiery liquid soothed his throat. The gods are good, after all, Doc thought, and waited for the pain he knew would follow. It came, in blinding waves, and once more the darkness rushed into his brain. . . .

When Doc regained consciousness again he knew somehow that a long time had elapsed. He lay quiet, an animal sense of caution keeping his eyes closed. Again he heard voices, those same voices—a man's deep voice, and the golden-haired girl's. The voices seemed to be coming from a vast distance, but Doc Hardy knew they were there in the room with him.

"I don't know," he heard the man say.

"This gent — mebby he's an outlaw. Mebby he robbed a bank, or killed somebody."

"He doesn't look like an outlaw," the girl argued. "He looks old, and tired, like he's had a lot of bad luck. He looks like he needs friends to take care of him, more than he needs a sheriff."

"But what if he *is* an outlaw? And what if the law came here, and found him? Folks here in the valley are already suspicious of me; they know I served time in the pen. Finding an outlaw here would just about finish us, you know that."

The girl said softly, "Yes, I know that. But, somehow, I don't think he's bad. Please, Bill—don't say anything to the sheriff. It'll be a long time before he's well enough to walk again. And by that time, maybe we'll know for sure."

Doc Hardy lay there, waiting for the man's answer. If the man decided to go for the sheriff, it meant a hangnoose for Doc Hardy. Doc Hardy was a wiry, bearded little man who tried always to appear neat and clean. He wasn't old, but his hair and beard were streaked with gray. Doc didn't like to rob and kill, but circumstances—and whiskey—had forced him to it. Now his slim fingers were as deft and swift with a gun as they once had been with knife and scalpel.

"You won't say anything, will you, Bill?"

"All right, honey, if you want it that way," Bill said.

The girl laughed, and Doc knew she'd put her arms about the man. Doc opened his eyes a little. The man was big, young and brown-faced. He was kissing the girl, and Doc knew that they loved each other a lot.

They left, and Doc looked about the roughly-furnished room. Through an open window he could see sheds and corrals and a few cows grazing on the lush grass. Doc lay there and thought about how lucky this young gent was to have a place like this and a swell, pretty wife like the yellow-haired girl.

Doc knew he was lucky, too. The young fellow had suspected that he was an outlaw, had wanted to go for the sheriff. But the girl, Marcia, had talked him out of it. She didn't think he looked bad. Doc's lips quirked grimly at the thought. Most folks *knew* Doc Hardy was bad; they'd jump at the chance to turn him over to the law. But this girl was different. She'd saved his life, out there on the plain, and now she was saving it again.

Doc tried to move, and found that he could. The sound brought the two back into the room. They stood smiling down at Doc Hardy.

"You feel better, oldtimer?" Bill asked.

"Quite," Doc tried to look puzzled. "How did I get here?"

"Marcia brought you. You tumbled off your horse, out there on the prairie. You were in a pretty bad way. I cut a slug outa your side with a butcher knife. That was yesterday. No need to worry now, though. We'll take care of you till you're well."

"Truly, I am greatly indebted to you both," Doc murmured. "Perhaps some day, the gods willing, I shall be able to repay you in some small way."

"You don't owe us a thing," said the young man.

In the silence that followed, Doc knew that they were waiting for him to volunteer information as to who he was, and why he'd been riding across the plain with a bullet in his side.

But Doc said nothing, and the girl asked, "Hungry?"

DOC inclined his head, and the girl left the room. She returned almost instantly, bearing a plate that held hot food. As he ate, the girl talked. The big young gent was Bill Kinlock, and

the girl, Marcia, was his wife. This little cow ranch belonged to them.

When Doc knew he had to tell them something, he said, "My name's Moran —Jim Moran."

Doc saw quick suspicion in Bill Kinlock's eyes. But Doc wasn't worried now, for Kinlock had already promised his blue-eyed wife he wouldn't go to the sheriff. . . .

Three months passed, then four—and Doc Hardy was still at Bill Kinlock's place. He didn't know exactly why he stayed. It was safe, that was one thing. Doc didn't ever go to Paintrock, the nearest cowtown, and Bill Kinlock and his wife had few visitors.

One day, Marcia Kinlock had told Doc why Bill Kinlock was looked on with suspicion by some folks in the valley. Kinlock had spent three years in the Huntsville pen, on a cattle-stealing charge. He'd been down in the Big Bend country then; and after leaving the gray walls he'd brought his bride here to the Panhandle and started over again. Since coming here he'd given folks no reason to think he was anything but honest and square. The valley had heard that Bill Kinlock wasn't really guilty of that cattle stealing charge, that he'd been framed. But the prison-stain was on him, and they couldn't be sure. So they held aloof, awaiting final proof of his honesty.

"He *was* framed," Marcia told Doc. "He had a swell little ranch started down there in the Big Bend. But somebody wanted it—Dick Sears, I think. Dick Sears owned a big outfit adjoining Bill's place. To get Bill's place, he had to get rid of Bill. So one morning Bill went out and found ten head of Sears' cattle in his corral. Before he could turn them out Dick Sears rode up with the sheriff. They arrested Bill, and when they searched the place they found several more hides off of Sears' cows in Bill's barn. That was enough to send Bill to the pen.

"Bill knew that Dick Sears had framed him, or had it done, but he could prove nothing. So he served his sentence, and we got married and came here. I can't *make* folks understand that Bill's not a thief, that he's really fine and honest. But, some day, they'll find it out for themselves. Then we'll have friends and neighbors, like other folks. That's all we ask."

Now it was mid-July. And now the world was no longer green and lush and alive. The flowers and grass had wilted under the fierce rays of a merciless sun. The earth was hard and cracked and dead. Savage winds tortured the plain, and water holes were fast drying up. Drought had hit the Panhandle.

Doc Hardy watched the lines of worry deepen in Bill Kinlock's face. For Bill Kinlock, even more than most other ranchers in the basin, was dogged by hard luck. Kinlock, Doc knew, had had to mortgage his place in the Spring to get money. With ordinary luck he could pay off the note in the Fall. But Bill Kinlock couldn't afford to lose any cows. And if it didn't rain pretty soon he'd lose some, maybe all of them.

July passed into August, and the rain didn't come. The sun beat down savagely from a brassy sky. Water holes became fewer. Buzzards circled, and sometimes dropped to the parched earth. The stench of dead cattle rode the dry wind.

Bill Kinlock hadn't lost any cattle yet, but he soon would. His last water hole would soon be empty. Bill Kinlock and his slim wife worked furiously from dawn to dark, trying desperately to salvage their happiness and future. Doc Hardy worked, too. He didn't know why he did it. Doc Hardy had never liked hard labor. Hard work, he'd often said, was for those less gifted than he.

But now he worked. "Thus I pay my

debt," he told himself. "To these two I owe my miserable life—and by slavish work, which, after all, is harder than dying, I repay them."

When the rains came, Doc told himself, he'd be compensated. He'd see the lines vanish from Bill Kinlock's haggard face; he'd see the smile return to Marcia's red lips and hear her sing again. Then he'd ride on. He was satisfied here. Bill Kinlock brought from town enough whiskey to satisfy the cravings inside him. But it wouldn't do. Doc Hardy was an outcast, a killer, a pariah among honest, decent folks.

When the rains came, he'd ride on.

. . .

BUT September came, and it hadn't rained. "Two more weeks without rain and I'll be ruined," Bill Kinlock said bitterly. "I won't have any cows, no ranch. Marcia and me will lose everything we've fought and slaved for."

"Courage, my friend," Doc advised. "We'll keep on fighting, and it will rain. The gods like their jest, but in the end they relent. The rain will come, and the grass will be green again."

"But too late to help me, I'm afraid," said Kinlock. "I need money—I've *got* to have money, to pay off that note at the bank. And the bank has all the money."

Bill Kinlock looked off toward Paintrock, and Doc wondered if he was thinking about the money in the bank's vault. Worry and despair did queer things to men. He looked at Marcia's slender body, slumped tiredly as she drew a bucket of water from the almost-dry well. Marcia didn't sing or laugh any more.

Life was queer, Doc Hardy thought. Here was he, a miserable failure, a killer, of use to no one—and he was safe, without worry. And here were these two kids, young and clean and honest, facing ruin.

"Almost," Doc murmured, "I am ashamed to have deceived them. But not quite. Self preservation is the first law of man. And I am not a hero; no, not even a man — merely a miserable, undeserving creature cast in His mold."

Bill and Marcia Kinlock no longer thought that the man they knew as Jim Moran might be an outlaw. They thought he was a pretty swell fellow. For Doc Hardy knew the art of making folks like him. Lately, they'd had no time to think of anything except the spectre of ruin that faced them.

For, although ragged thunderheads rimmed the horizon every day, it didn't rain. And now Doc knew that Bill Kinlock *had* been thinking about the money that was in the bank's valut in Paintrock. The worry, the almost certainty of the ruin he faced, was doing something to Kinlock's mind. The last water hole on Bill Kinlock's place was just a hoof-trampled quagmire about which his thirsty cows circled and bawled. And the strain of seeing everything he had in the world swept away, was proving too great for Bill Kinlock.

That day, when the last of his water went, Bill Kinlock drank a quart of the whiskey he'd brought for Doc Hardy. He didn't get drunk. He just got cold and quiet; his eyes were hard, like black chips of ice, as he sat in the shade and stared off toward Paintrock. Marcia watched, her face troubled.

Doc touched Kinlock's shoulder, said, "Bill, the water is gone from Willow Springs. Perhaps, if we dug into the mud, water will seep through."

Bill Kinlock said nothing, didn't even look at him. And Doc Hardy saddled his horse and rode to Willow Springs. He put in two hours of sweaty, back-breaking work, and was rewarded with perhaps a barrel of muddy water. It was quickly sucked up and trampled by the wild-eyed, skinny cows.

The sun had gone down, and shadows

were slinking across the blighted prairie when Doc returned to the ranch house. Bill Kinlock still sat there, and Marcia stood beside him, her hand on his shoulder. Doc knew that they'd been talking, perhaps arguing, for Marcia's face was stained with tears.

They looked at Doc Hardy, like they thought maybe a miracle had happened there at the water hole. But Doc could offer them no hope; he knew that only the miracle of rain could save them. And there was no sign of rain.

That night, as he lay in the dark and listened to the ragged voices in the next room, Doc discovered what Bill Kinlock and his wife had been arguing about.

"No, Bill—please!" he heard Marcia say. "That would make you a thief!"

"What of it?" Bill Kinlock asked bitterly. "That's what some people think of me, anyhow. So I'll be a thief."

"I—you wouldn't enjoy having a ranch, if it was bought with money you'd stolen. Don't you know that?"

Kinlock said harshly, "No, I don't know that. I just know that I don't aim to lose this ranch, like I lost the other one. The bank could give me an extension on that note, but they won't do it. They aim to cheat me out of my ranch. It's the same as if they took a gun and robbed me."

"No, Bill. Worrying about it has made you see things wrong. What if we do lose the ranch? We'll still be together; we can go somewheres and start over again. And you'd still be honest."

"Damn honesty!" Doc heard Bill Kinlock say. "I've tried that, and what has it got me? Nothing but worry and work and ruin. No, honey—I've made up my mind, and you can't change it."

"What if you're caught?"

"I won't be. I've got it figured out. I'll go into the bank through a back door, just before they're closin' for the day, and I'll be wearin' a mask. They won't recognize me. I'll be a mile out of town before anybody realizes what's happened. Then I'll circle through the hills and cover my trail. . . ."

So that was it, Doc thought. Bill Kinlock aimed to rob the Paintrock bank. Doc grinned twistedly in the darkness. The kid didn't savvy this owlhoot game. The odds against his getting away with robbing the bank were about ten to one. But that was no affair of Doc's; he didn't aim to lose any sleep over it.

But Doc Hardy didn't sleep much that night, and by morning he'd decided what he'd do. If there was no money in the bank vault, Bill Kinlock couldn't rob it, could he?

"Truly, an inspiring thought," Doc told himself grandly. "One is to be commended for having fathered it. But then an empty bank vault is in itself an inspiring sight, exceeded only by the sight of a full one when one has the means of emptying it."

HIGHLY satisfied with himself, Doc drank the last of his whiskey and whistled a gay tune as he saddled his big dun at noon the next day. He waved a hand casually as he passed the porch where Bill Kinlock sat quiet and cold-eyed, saying, "Perhaps I can coax another barrel of moisture from the mud," and rode away.

But Doc Hardy didn't go to Willow Springs. Out of sight of the ranch house, he changed his course and headed at a gallop for the town of Paintrock. He slowed the dun as he rode along the narrow, dusty street, hat pulled low over his wary eyes. But nobody more than glanced at this thin, gray-bearded rider; nobody suspected that here was Doc Hardy, wanted in four states, with a small fortune in

rewards on his head.

Doc wasted no time. He went through an alley and left the dun at a rack behind the false-fronted bank building. Nobody was in sight; the town lay quiet, like a lazy old dog in the sunshine. Doc went through a back doorway, just as he'd heard Bill Kinlock plan to do, and along a corridor into the main part of the bank. There he paused, a long-barreled gun in his hand.

Only one man was in the bank, a fat bald gent in the Cashier cage. He looked up and saw Doc, and his lips gaped, letting the cigar he'd been smoking fall to the floor.

Doc Hardy said softly, "Just stay quiet, my good man, and you won't get hurt. This, to put it crudely, is a stick-up."

The fat cashier stammered, "Y-you can't get away with this—Sheriff Jube Tanner'll get you—"

Doc laughed. "Get Doc Hardy? Others have tried, and where are they now?"

Sweat popped out on the banker's fat face. "You don't mean—you're D-Doc Hardy?"

"I see that my name, like a bad smell, has preceded me!" His voice grated. "But come, come! You have a canvas bag there. Put in it what money you have there, then we shall go to the vault and see what we have there."

It took no more than a couple of minutes. Then, clutching the canvas sack that was bulging with banknotes, Doc Hardy left by the back doorway and darted to the big dun. As he mounted, he heard the fat cashier's shrill, squalling voice rousing the town.

Doc Hardy spurred back through the alley and along the dusty street. A voice yelled, "There he goes—he's robbed the bank!" A gun blasted, and lead snapped waspishly about Doc's head.

But quickly he left the main drag and was at the edge of town. There a cardboard placard, nailed to a tree, caught his eye, and he perked the dun to a slithering halt. Smiling sardonically, he regarded the placard.

It was a reward flyer, and a likeness of himself was on it, along with the words: $2000 reward—Dead or Alive. Underneath, in smaller type, was a lengthy list of the crimes with which he was charged.

Doc's smile deepened, and he said, "What a record! Not one to boast of, to be sure, but an impressive one. No one can deny that, despite multiple faults, Doc Hardy is a most remarkable man!"

Almost lovingly, Doc detached the placard from the tree, placed it carefully with one he had taken from above the cashier's window in the bank, and rode on. There was a rising drone of sound in the town behind him, but as yet no sign of pursuit. It would take several minutes for a posse to form, Doc knew, and by then he'd have a safe lead.

He rode fast across the plain, headed westward, unable to resist a peek into the money-filled sack. "Truly, a king's ransom," he thought. "An elegant sufficiency for a man of modest wants."

And the bank vault was quite empty of paper money. . . .

Bill Kinlock and his wife stood on the porch of their little ranch house and watched the man they knew as Jim Moran ride toward them. The sweat-covered dun, coming at a crow-hoppy gallop, was limping badly. They looked at the exhausted dun, at the rider's gray, set face, and sensed that something was wrong.

Doc Hardy dragged the dun to a halt, and tumbled to the ground. He said flatly, "Kinlock, I've got to have a fresh mount. My horse has thrown a shoe, and I'm in a hurry."

Bill Kinlock asked tersely, "What's happened, Moran?"

DOC HARDY shrugged. "I see there's no use lying. I've just robbed a bank, Kinlock, and men are on my trail."

Bill Kinlock said slowly, "Robbed a bank? So that's the kind of skunk you are. . . ."

Doc Hardy seemed to grow smaller as he hunkered down. All at once his face was cold and cruel and sneering, like a carefully arranged mask had slipped.

"If I'm a skunk, Kinlock, then so are you," he sneered. "You meant to rob that same bank, didn't you?"

"That's right," Kinlock nodded. "But I was drunk then, and a little crazy. Now I'm neither. Now I savvy what a damn fool I was for ever thinking of such a thing. I'd already decided against robbing the bank, before you rode up. And now I savvy what I should have guessed sooner—you're an outlaw."

Doc Hardy bowed mockingly. "You were a gullible fool, Kinlock, for not having known it from the first. My name, unfortunately, is not Jim Moran—but Doc Hardy."

Bill Kinlock stiffened, and Marcia's hand went to her lips. Doc inclined his head appreciatively.

"I see I am not wholly unknown, even here," he said ironically. "Doc Hardy, bandit, killer and renegade. You have been honored, my friend, having afforded sanctuary for such a one."

"Honored, hell!" Bill Kinlock said harshly. "You played me for a sucker, Hardy, and I was one. You worked for me, slept in my house, ate from my table—and that's why I haven't already put hot lead into you. That's why I won't try to stop you if you want to take a horse from my corral and ride on."

"Truly, loyalty and godliness go hand-in-hand," said Doc. "Such honesty as yours should be rewarded. Perhaps these will in a small way compensate you for the three years you spent behind gray walls for a crime you did not commit."

His hand dipped into the sack, and a dozen gleaming banknotes fluttered to the ground at Bill Kinlocks feet.

Kinlock asked flatly, "How do you know these things?"

Doc Hardy laughed tauntingly. "Why shouldn't I know them? I have ranged far, my friend. Perhaps, at one time, I drew the unsavory pay of a man called Dick Sears. Perhaps, in the line of duty, I personally planted the evidence that sent to prison a young rancher who happened to be in Dick Sears' way. Do you understand, Kinlock, or shall I elaborate?"

Contempt and hate blazed in Bill Kinlock's eyes. He said raggedly, "So it was you who—did that—to me? It must have been, or you wouldn't have known about it. Damn you, Hardy, I could forgive this—but not that other—not those three years I spent in hell. I'm going to kill you!"

Marcia screamed, "Don't, Bill! He's lying—he didn't. . . ."

It happened, then, with cyclonic swiftness. Bill Kinlock leaped away from Marcia, snatching at his gun. Doc Hardy's slim fingers flashed downward toward the black butts of his own deadly guns.

Smoke and powderflame lashed out, and a gunshot roared. And through the billowing smoke Bill Kinlock looked at Doc Hardy. Doc was standing spread-legged, swaying, the muzzles of his guns pointing at the ground. Then, slowly, gently, Doc Hardy sank to the ground and lay across the money-filled sack.

Bill Kinlock looked surprisedly down

at the smoking gun in his hand. He seemed dazed, and a little shaky now. Anger and hate had made him match guns with one of the swiftest and deadliest gunmen west of the Missouri —and by some miracle he'd won.

He still stood there, gun in hand, an arm about his wife, when a posse, led by rawboned old Jube Tanner, thundered up a moment later. The possemen looked at Bill Kinlock, at the gun in his hand. Then they looked at Doc Hardy, sprawled across the sack that held the bank's money.

"Great work, Bill," Sheriff Tanner said then. "That gent you just killed was Doc Hardy. Did you know that?"

"I knew it," said Bill Kinlock slowly.

"He just robbed the bank in town," the sheriff went on. "He likely would have got clean away, too, if you hadn't stopped him. After this, I reckon there won't be any doubt in anybody's mind about you bein' honest and square and on the right side of the law."

ONE of the possemen had taken from the ground the two pieces of cardboard that Doc Hardy had dropped when he grabbed for his guns. One of them was the reward flyer Doc had taken from the tree; the other was the placard he'd taken from over the cashier's cage in the Paintrock bank, and it said: $5000 FOR DEAD BANK ROBBERS—the amount the State Banker's Association was willing to pay for bandits killed while robbing, or within a certain time after robbing, a Texas bank.

"Reckon that means you, Kinlock," grinned the possemen. "You'll be in line for that bank reward, and the two thousand dollar bounty on this gunhellion's head to-boot. You ain't got a thing to worry about, even if it don't rain for another year!"

Bill Kinlock looked about him, at the faces that held friendliness and new respect.

Then he looked down at Doc Hardy's still figure. Doc's gaunt face didn't look cruel and bitter and sneering now; a soft, satisfied smile seemed to curl the corners of his lips, almost as if he understood this miracle that his dying had wrought.

"Dead as burnt grass," somebody said. "Doc Hardy was an ornery, rotten skunk."

Marcia Kinlock said softly, "And a brave, good man!"

The possemen looked quickly at her. They didn't savvy that. They didn't savvy the awed light that was in the eyes of Bill Kinlock and his wife as they stood, arms about each other, and looked down at Doc Hardy. . . .

EMPTY SADDLES MEAN WAR!

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.38 Thunder

By

BILL DAVIS

Author of "Holster Your Hardware, Badman, or Die!", etc.

It was war, it was Red River's half-dozen small ranches against the greediest, deadliest range-hog of them all, and only Kent Harper's lightning Colts would be missing at the bloody last-stand barricade!

Hot, flaming lead tore through the flesh of men and lay them in the dust!

"IT'S war, Kent Harper. It's us half dozen ranchers, us little guys, against the damndest, cold-bloodedest range-hog of them all," Billy Lane said.

"Sure, sure," Kent Harper said. "It's war." He looked up at one of the men across the table from him. He said quietly: "What're yuh sayin', son?"

It was shortly after noon, and there were men from the town at the bar and at two or three other tables, and these paused in their drinking and watched. This war would be none of their busi-

ness, they were citizens of the town of Red River and Sid Renner already owned the whole town, but deep in the soul of every Red River citizen the hope still burned that someday, somehow they would once again be out from under the heel of Renner and his sidewinder segundos. . . .

"He took this town because nobody would get ready for him!" Billy Lane had grabbed Kent Harper's shoulder now. "An' he'll take the rest of us one by one if we don't gang up and stop him *now!*"

Sitting there being shaken by Billy, Kent Harper had gradually raised one eyebrow and the cards in his hands had gradually closed.

"Ain't you gettin' a wee bit excited, son?" Kent said quietly. "Ain't you goin' a shade loco mebbe?"

"Sure; I'm goin' loco. Plumb loco. Any man who tried to get anybody to stand up on his own two legs and fight for his rights in this country would have to be loco—"

"Listen, son," Kent cut in softly, "there ain't nobody afraid to fight for his rights. I carry two guns, see. Sid Renner or any other son with ideas try to set foot on my spread an' these here two guns'll start workin' so fast this son with ideas won't know where he's at."

Kent fanned his cards partially again. He said: "Ain't nobody goin' tuh push me around, son."

Billy Lane was shaking Kent Harper's shoulder now.

"An' what about the rest of us? Yuh just goin' tuh watch us go under, like yuh watched the whole damned town go?"

Kent Harper was looking at Billy Lane's hand on his shoulder. He sat that way waiting for the kid to stop shaking him. Then he looked up at the kid's face.

"I'm askin' yuh," the kid was shouting now, "what about the rest of us?"

Kent Harper set his head on one side. He crooked up one corner of his mouth.

"I *ain't* the sheriff, yuh know, son," he finally said in the same unruffled soft tones. "I *ain't* sech hell on wheels with these here two cutters that I can save the whole range, an' wipe out single-handed every range-hog comes along."

"The *sheriff!*" the kid spat it. "Ain't nuthin' but another o' Renner's hired-guns. An mebbe you couldn't save the whole range with your guns, Kent Harper, but you could damn well tip the balance in the favor of us small ranchers if yuh sided us! An' whut makes you think Sid Renner ain't comin' after you too? Right now he's bringin' in every gun-slammer this side of the Sentinels—an' whut do you figure *that's* for?"

Kent Harper was glancing around the room.

"Not so loud, son. Not so loud. Yuh got all these here gents lookin' at us as if we was both loco." He turned and smiled at Billy Lane. "When it's only you!"

The man with the black face who'd been at the corner table pushed back his chair now. He moved toward Billy Lane keeping his eyes on the kid's face, weaving his hips between the intervening chairs and tables.

"You're sayin' it, Harper," this man said. "The kid's too damned loco for his own good. And too damned blab-mouthed."

The man slammed Billy Lane across the mouth with his open palm. Then he was reaching for his gun as Billy was reaching automatically and blindly for his own weapon.

The man was one of Sid Renner's top segundos. Kent Harper had recognized him at once. The reason the man's lead didn't cut Billy Lane to the floor was that Kent Harper, shooting over the table edge from the hip, threw his lead into the man's body lethally a split-

second before the black-faced one could pull trigger.

"I said the kid was loco," Kent Harper said quietly to the dead man at his feet. "I didn't say he was blab-mouthed. I didn't say he was too damned blab-mouthed."

The kid said huskily: "Thanks, Kent. You saved my life, I reckon. . . . "

Kent Harper was fanning his cards open again. He eyed the tense men at the table, who had half risen and were still in that position.

He said: "Now where was we . . ."

The kid screwed his face up in that frown he had. He was a good-looking kid, but he would always look like a kid. He had blond, unruly hair and dark blue eyes that were set wide apart.

"Like that, it was," he said again. "Practically tells me he doesn't give a hoot what happens to anybody else on this range, and then calmly kills Sid Renner's righthand man to save my life!"

The girl kept her eyes out the window down, and the kid did not see what was in them.

"That would be Kent," she murmured. "That is the way Kent would do it." She dropped her eyes and shook her head once and let out a tight sigh. "Just can't stop fighting the whole world—and just can't keep from being the really fine man he is."

BILLY LANE chewed the piece of straw in his right hand vigorously.

"*I* can't figure the guy," he said. "Never could. . . . "

Betty Moore was gazing out the window down again. Her eyes, deep blue always but dark now with a certain sadness, gazed out over her father's well-kept, prosperous-looking spread. Once Bert Moore, Betty's father, had taken Kent Harper in, when he was a homeless war-orphan, and once they had hoped that the boy would turn into a fine young man. . . .

And he had turned into a fine young man, Betty thought now, there was no man finer than Kent Harper—he'd just never grown up, was all; before they'd taken him in, the hardness, the dog-eat-dog psychology, had settled too deeply into his soul. It took a man to be fearless, like Kent was now; it took a great man to be fearless without being hard, like Betty hoped with all her heart and soul Kent would one day become. . . .

"Here you and your dad been like a sister and a father to him all his life—an' now when you're in trouble he won't lift a finger to help yuh—" The kid had said it suddenly, it had not been an argument he had used on Kent, had been something that none of them had even let enter their thoughts, but now he had blurted it.

The girl's gaze did not waver.

"Kent doesn't owe me or my father anything," she said softly. . . .

Sid Renner said: "I'll gun the damnfool down myself. I'll go down there an' gun the damnfool down myself."

Sid Renner didn't ride onto Kent Harper's spread alone when the gunking went though. He *rode* alone all right, that is he kept his eyes straight ahead as though his crew had followed him without his knowledge, but he did not appear at Kent Harper's ranch-house single-handed. Sid Renner didn't have to give orders to his henchmen to ride with him to know that they'd always be at his side in a Colt-crisis. . . .

Kent Harper was reading a book when Sid Renner kicked open the front door. Renner and his crew had not ridden in soundlessly, but to look at Kent Harper one would have thought that they had. He was not even wearing his gun. He had taken it off, as was his custom, to eat dinner, and it lay in its holster with its belt on the table in the

center of the room.

"Get up, Harper," Sid Renner said softly. Sid Renner was a dark man, a man with soft features and a gently aquiline nose and lips that were too narrow and too tight-drawn. He had the motions of a snake, and you saw his deadliness in the cold, glistening black beads that were his eyes. "Get up, Harper, and go for your gun. . . . "

Kent Harper said: "I'm warnin' yuh, Renner, to get the hell out of here. I'm warnin' yuh jest once, and then I ain't warnin' yuh any more."

The renegade range-hog laughed with genuine ease and amusement. This was funny to him to his core, the idea of this man talking like this when he didn't even have his guns at his hips.

"Don't be funny, Harper," Renner scoffed. "Don't make me laugh."

The book closed slowly in Kent's two hard brown hands. The light that was suddenly in his grey eyes made the men behind Renner forget momentarily that Harper was unarmed and they were leveling their irons suddenly. And the scarcely noticeable stiffening of Kent's lips rounded out the threat that had begun in the man's eyes.

"I'm warnin' you, Renner," Kent Harper repeated, "tuh get the hell out of here. . . . "

Sid Renner didn't know what struck him. Certainly he didn't know what had swept his gun out of his hand. Kent Harper had suddenly gone into action, was what had happened; like a greased lightning bolt; like hell itself unleashed. . . .

And his .38 was flaming in his hands finally as though by magic; and as accurately as if it had originally been in his hand, instead of there in the middle of the room whither he had dived somehow with the speed of light.

The book crashing in his face had blotted out Renner's vision at the start; nobody knew whether it was Harper's hand or his foot that had slapped the weapon from Renner's grasp. But with all his incredible speed, Kent Harper could not outshoot all of the half-dozen men who were behind Renner, before their bullets had begun to tell on him.

Three of Renner's men were crawling to the floor before a bullet from the gun of one of the others creased Kent's skull. And as Kent slumped there behind the oak-plank table the infuriated gun-king had his own weapon in his hand at last once again, and he was pumping lead in Kent's direction wildly, madly. . . .

"The damned, dirty, son of a . . . " Renner was gritting furiously as he triggered every slug out of his iron.

BILLY LANE was one of the three crawling flat-bellied in the vanguard. The others were moving up fifty feet behind. The three in the front had six-guns out and ready, the others would cover the first assault with their .30-30's.

The men who'd stayed outside Kent Harper's place had not been posted as guards. These segundos of Sid Renner's feared no man, particularly on this range that Renner ruled. They knew from long experience that no Red River citizen would try to ambush them, or come to Kent Harper's rescue. Red River citizens, they reasoned, didn't have the guts any more in the first place; and in the second place, no man in Red River gave a hoot in hell for Kent Harper any more than Kent gave a hoot in hell for any man on Red River range. . . .

But that was reckoning without the unshakable loyalty and perserverence of one man: young Billy Lane. And it was not taking into account Kent Harper's having so recently saved Billy Lane's life. . . .

"It's our chance to strike at them before they're ready to wipe us out," Billy

had argued to the other small ranchers. "Sure as we're standin' here, Renner'll go after Kent Harper for shootin' his segundo, before he makes any other move. We can lie there near Kent's place, an' take 'em first on the outside an' then cut down on them that goes inside. . . ."

It was a grim and ruthless business, there in the dark, as Billy and his two confederates swept at the nearest Renner henchmen with clubbed six-guns. And when a Renner man got free to grab for his own gun, a .30-30 bullet seemed to nick in from nowhere to drop him in his tracks.

The first shots brought Renner men to the door of Harper's ranchhouse. And the same sinister .30-30 slugs smacked out of the gloom beyond the ranch yard to knock these men out of the rectangle of light they appeared in as fast as they showed.

Billy was the first to make a window of the house. Crouched below it, he could see what was taking place inside. And what had been taking place when he and his neighbors attacked.

Kent Harper was spread-eagle to one wall. Spikes had been driven into the wall as at the points of a star, and Kent's wrists and ankles had been strapped to these. And Kent, hanging unconscious, was in the process of being outlined against the wall by bullet holes. Renner, evidently, had been having a pleasant time of seeing how close to Kent's body he could nip his lead. The floor around Kent, and the wall, and Kent's clothing, were soaking wet: from the men's efforts no doubt to bring Kent to with cold water so that he might better enjoy the game.

Renner was shucking lead into his Colt for a more pressing purpose now, however. Renner's fingers showed the beginning of panic in fact as he glanced up periodically to see one after another of his men—there must have been a dozen in the room with him—slump to the floor at the door or at a window.

"What in hell. . . ," Billy heard the gun-king mumble. "What in hell. . . ."

For Renner had not brought his entire army with him by any means. And he had no way of knowing how many of his men outside had been dropped.

Faced for the first time in a great many years by what seemed to be a fighting force equal to his own, and so placed in a position that he simply never expected to be in again on this range, the gun-boss fell into panic.

When Billy Lane put one leg over the windowsill and snapped at Renner: "Reach, Renner! Reach an' take a load of lead in your belly!" the renegade dove into a back room, slamming the door after him. Billy poured lead into the heavy planking, and he was after Renner in a flash, but the latch had been thrown on the other side of the door.

Back at the window Billy shouted: "Get Renner! Cover th' back of the place—the damned snake is tryin' tuh sneak out on us!" . . .

BILLY LANE looked at Kent Harper. Kent Harper looked back at Billy Lane. The men standing behind Billy looked at Kent too but Kent didn't bother to meet their glances.

"We know where we stand now, don't we Kent?" Billy was saying. "You saved saved my life against Renner's devils—and I saved yours. We've both been attacked by a common enemy, an' we both know now that we stand side by side ag'in him." Billy paused and he drew a breath and he looked more mature in that moment than his years warranted. "We're takin' the fight tuh Renner tonight, Kent. We beat him to the first bullet, an' we're followin' up before he can get set to strike back. It's the only way we kin beat him."—Billy lowered his voice—"We're askin' yuh to ride with us tonight, Kent Harper. An'

we know what yore answer will be."

Kent Harper had not risen when the little ranchers and their crews, led by Billy Lane, had arrived. Kent Harper had done more reading than usual in the ten days he'd been recuperating, and slouched in the oak and leather chair he'd whittled himself, he had a book in his two hands now. The flat smile on his face not scarcely changed during Billy's oration.

"I saved yore life," Kent Harper echoed ruminatively, "an' you saved mine. —Sounds like we're even then, don't it, Billy? Sounds like our account's closed, don't it?"

The sound of the clock ticking was there, and the breathing of the men maybe increasing in volume, but nothing else broke the tense silence that ensued in those moments. Billy Lane's fiery brown eyes probing with disbelief growing into hate, into Kent Harper's cold grey ones, Kent's stare never wavering or beginning to break under the kid's obviously growing fury.

"I guess mebbe we didn't know what yore answer would be after all, Kent Harper," Billy finally let out slowly. "I guess we figured we was dealin' with a man an' not a mule."

Kent Harper kept staring at the door that had closed behind Billy and the men of Red River range for minutes after the men had left. Kent's one eyebrow lifted slowly, but his expression did not change otherwise.

When are you going to grow up, son? When are you going to quit acting like a button who's still wet behind the ears?

Kent Harper had asked himself that question many times in recent months, but he'd never known how to answer it. If a man wanted to beat the world, Kent had always figured, he had to be hard, and if a man wanted to be hard, he didn't take time out to question the justice or decency of his actions.

And feeling maturity coming on him, sensing the nagging of mature conscience, Kent had mistaken this for weakness, and he had mistrusted it.

Once Kent had heard Betty Moore say: "I guess it's pretty easy to be hard. I doubt if it's so easy to be hard and be a man too." And for some damned reason, he'd always remembered that, though he'd tried to keep it out of his thoughts.

I doubt if it's so easy to be hard and be a man too. . . .

Mebbe, Kent let himself think—and he could feel the blood go up the back of his neck suddenly for some damned reason—mebbe it was time he quit being hard, like a kid, and started being a man. . . .

It was simple, being hard, that's why kids liked it, that's why kids were slow to give up being hard. It wasn't so simple being a man. Kent Harper found that out right away. He buckled on his gun-belt. After that he wasn't sure just how to conduct himself. Likely that was part of being a man. It was a complex business, and you had to face that part of it and still be tough enough to survive.

He rode toward the Moore ranch. He'd owed Pop Moore and Betty one hell of a lot for one hell of a long time, he guessed; maybe he should go see them and see how he might start repaying his debt to them.

Billy Lane was there ahead of Kent Harper. He was standing on the porch, and Kent could recognize him by the yellow light that streamed from within. And he could recognize Betty, also framed in the open doorway, talking to Billy.

When Kent stepped down a gun came into Billy's right hand.

"We don't want you here, Harper," Billy said. "You can get back up on your horse and ride out again. I ain't kiddin' one bit, Harper."

BETTY MOORE looked at these two men that she'd known all her life, and under such different circumstances. There'd been times when she'd thought she was in love with both of them, and times when her preference had gone definitely, she'd thought, to one or the other. She'd known them as boys, and now she was seeing them both reach manhood. Her love for them had of course always been a girl's, but soon she knew it could become a woman's. . . .

Kent Harper said to Betty: "I was wonderin' if mebbe I couldn't do some of Pop's fightin' for 'im, when they ride after Sid Renner tonight. Pop's kinda gettin' along, an' I thought mebbe I could sort of repay you and Pop for all yuh done for me, by mebbe doin' yore fightin' for yuh tonight—"

It wasn't the usual Kent Harper glib speech. It didn't end with an ironic wisecrack. It didn't sound at all like Kent Harper, but there it was, and something new had come into Betty's eyes, it was that Kent could see shining even in the dark; it was not a surprise to Betty, this speech of Kent's, it was rather as though it was something she had been hoping and praying and knowing would some day come and here it was. . . .

Billy Lane said: "None o' us Red River men want you ridin' with us, Kent Harper." Billy's tones were still bitter, harsh, but the beginning of uncertainty was in them, so that he added, frowning: "What's yore game anyway, Kent Harper? What kind of a play do yuh figure on makin' now?"

Kent Harper said to Billy: "Ain't no game, Billy, or no play. Mebbe it's just I want to try bein' a man for a change—instead of a mule."

The old Kent Harper levity was in that last, and Kent said it with a hint of a smile, but it went with sincerity now instead of with sarcasm. This was contrition, not insolence.

Billy Lane kept the gun up but his frown furrowed his young brow deeper. Betty was smiling, and she was looking at these two men, and she wondered why it was that a man who has come back seems the greater than a man who has never gone away, when she was sure that this could not actually be true at all. . . .

Sid Renner said: "Don't any of yuh move. That's all I'm sayin'." He sat there on his black in the middle of the Moore front yard, and he said this very, very quietly. He sat there and his eye traveled around from one to another of the band of fighting ranchmen that Billy and Kent had gathered. "Jest all of yuh stand like yuh are—until I say the word, an' then yuh reach for yore irons."

Renner smiled very calmly. He sat there and smiled calmly and watched Billy and Kent and their men size the thing. Obviously Renner had men stationed with Winchesters all around the place. Obviously Renner was backed to the hilt with hot lead and fast gunhands. There was one time when Renner showed calm, quiet courage like now—that was when he had his enemy outnumbered at least ten to one in men, a thousand to one in bullets.

"It's goin' tuh be like this," Renner went on in the same soft voice. "The sheriff is goin' tuh find you gents lyin' right there where you're standin' now, with yore bellies full of lead. An' when the sheriff wants to know how come, I'll tell him how come. I'll tell him I rode in here tuh talk peace with you gents—an' yuh was all gathered here waitin' in ambush for me." His smile twisted off to one side now. "I'll explain further that it was jest fortunate for me that I happened to bring a few of my boys along for an escort."

Sid Renner had appeared as if by

magic, and if you did not know Renner too well, you might wonder if his men were actually there, they had moved in so quietly. And from the moment he had spoken Kent and Billy had been thinking as fast as their brains would function. . . .

"Wait a minute, Renner—" Billy began, but Renner didn't care to hear what he had to say.

"We ain't here to talk, Lane," Renner cut in. "This ain't goin' tuh be one of them affairs where the *hero* stalls the *villain* until the hero thinks up a smart play." Renner smiled evilly, broadly. "Yuh see, I read all them yarns myself."

THERE was a split second of silence then, there was a split second when the hair-trigger tenseness swelled to bursting. And then Renner was speaking again, from drawn-in lips, and in the same tone he'd used throughout.

"Reach, yuh damned fools—an' die." —Softly, he said it, without inflection, without emotion.

And hell broke loose. Bright, stabbing orange flame tore the blackness of the night to ribboned shreds. Hot, flaming lead tore through the flesh of men and lay them in the dust inexorably. It was slaughter, for the hell had torn across the clearing before Renner's soft words had sounded, and these valiant, last-stand ranchers died in their tracks reaching hopelessly for their guns.

When Betty ran out of the house with her gray-haired father behind her, lead knocked the old man against the door frame but it strangely spared the girl. No, not by chance; chance could play no part here; Renner had given the order to spare the girl.

In the shadows to which he'd withdrawn, Renner smiled as he watched the hysteria of this golden-haired cowgirl. She is not attractive that way, he thought. His smile widened. She will forget in time, though. Time changes everything. And then. . . . His pig eyes narrowed with the widening of his smile. . . .

It was wipe-out, it gained Sid Renner control of every square foot of Red River range. Betty Moore did not know why she was alive. Bleakly, hopelessly, she stared out the window of her own bedroom—a prisoner. A prisoner in her own home, on her own home ranch.

And then that night she heard the voices. The guards outside her window had not appeared for perhaps ten minutes, and now they'd come back and were talking.

". . . an' with half of us slammin' lead at the two top uns, one of 'em gets away!"

". . . musta dropped afore he was hit lethal, an' none of us was very acc'rate on 'im after that, figurin' he was already lead-filled. . . ."

Billy Lane or Kent Harper—one of them had gotten away! Betty Moore knew that her heart was pounding furiously, she knew that it was hammering so that she could hardly think, and hope once again brightened her eyes, and color came to her pale cheeks. . . .

One of them—her eyes became sober again, her expression grim. If they knew that one of them had gotten away—they were doubly sure that the other was dead.

Betty Moore felt the sweep of Destiny then. She remembered that she had always loved both Billy Lane and Kent Harper, and she remembered that she had feared the trouble that would come when she became the wife of one of them, as she was sure she one day would.

Destiny had chosen her husband, and Destiny had probably already chosen their rendezvous. Betty Moore tilted her firm little chin up now, and a great

pride shone in her deep blue eyes, for she knew in that moment that whichever one it was, Billy Lane or Kent Harper, he would come back, at the head of a gun army or alone, and either way he would one day wipe out the power of Sid Renner as the renegade had wiped out the honest ranchers, either way Betty Moore would ride at the side of her husband at last, and freedom and justice would come to Red River range once more. . . .

Those hell-spawned guns had spoken, and the flame of purgatory had lashed across that one strip of night, and brave men had fallen in their tracks before the hot lead of fiends. And one man had thought with the speed of lightning, and had moved faster, and one man alone had escaped that withering barrage by nothing more than the superkeenness of his senses and his reflexes.

He hung low now on the neck of the horse he'd swung onto in a single motion. Hard riding, but canny maneuvering, had brought him this far, had gained his freedom from most of his pursuers, but now it appeared that their very numbers would threaten his dash across the lone remaining flat before the start of the Sentinel badlands.

THE hunk of bark that suddenly departed from the tree beside his head —he'd stopped at the edge of the timber sizing his chances—and the terrible whine that rushed with it, bespoke the fugitive's suspicions: already they had spotted him, even now before he'd begun his dash.

He was off the sorrel gently, and his iron grip was twisting the rein so that the horse was eased to the ground on its side next him. The .45 he'd carried ready was holstered then, and his long hands were knowing the softly-smooth steel of the saddle rifle.

It was fair enough, he thought; they'd seen him, and now he saw them. They had had their try at him, now he'd have his try at them.

The misty moonlight showed perhaps a dozen figures on horseback picking their way among the trees from the rear. It took fancy sighting. It took the need of a white spot to see the black of one's sights against. It took the need of drawing one's bead through the array of intervening trees and touching the trigger on a split-instant find.

Cold fury played along the flat, calm lips of this lone warrior. Dull moonlight played along the metal of his weapon. If thundered, and the figure chosen was slammed from his saddle. It fitted there against the cheek of the man, and his left eye was all crowsfeet, and it thundered again and again. Flame winked from its double snout, and each time it claimed its victim.

And at last the man could allow a grim smile to cross his mouth, and at last a taste of victory was to light the bitter depths of his narrowed eyes. The fiends were done, they'd had enough, there in the timber they could no longer find their victim, and the steady winking of his rifle was taking too rapid and too persistent a toll. Kent Harper saw his pursuers turn tail, defeated in their bloodthirsty quest.

Whichever one it was, Betty Moore had decided, *he would come back, at the head of a gun army or alone, and either way he would one day wipe out the power of Sid Renner, and freedom and justice would come to Red River range once again. . . .*

Starpacker Stampede

By KENNETH FOWLER and ROD PATTERSON

Mebbeso there hadn't been any holdups under Marshal Grumpy Gordon, but Piccolo's sawed-off, addle-pated saddlepard still had a holsterfull of hell that said the town needed a new tin-badge!

Windy's smokepole lets go then, hammering and flaming!

"I GOT a scheme—" begins Windy McCarthy.

I groans and says, "To land us in the Tanktown calaboose, I suppose." That sawed-off, addle-pated pardner of mine can think up schemes faster than I can say no to 'em. His latest, which is callin' on Marshal "Grumpy" Gordon to propose a matrimonial alliance between himself and the marshal's daughter, Luella, has just landed him on his ear in the middle of Main Street. Personally I can't see what a runt like Windy can see in a big husky female like Luella Gordon, except that my pardner, though small, has a very large appetite, and Luella's maple sugar biscuits. . . .

Windy hooks his right boot heel into the well-worn brass rail of the Moosehead and takes a generous swallow of the amber Solly Weizenheimer has just

slid across the bar to him.

"You're plumb right about this scheme landin' us in the hoosegow," he states authoritatively, "but it won't be as inmates. Piccolo"— he sticks out his chest and pushes back his Stetson from the rim of his forehead— "I'm gonna run for Marshal of Tanktown against old Gordon."

I lightens the shock of this announcement with a deep swig of Solly's throat oil.

"Just think," pleads my pardner, "a hundred a month—and we can sleep right in the jail!"

You can see now why he needs the protection of an older and more experienced man, like me.

"Sleepin' in calabooses," I says coldly, "ain't no privilege to me, and if I recollect, it ain't no novelty to you. Finish your beer and let's be driftin'. We're down to our last sawbuck, and if we don't hook onto a job soon—"

It's like talkin' to the wind.

McCarthy finds out from Solly Weizenheimer, who is almost as full of information as a encyclopedia, that all you need to do if you want to run for public office in Tanktown is get fifty bonafide voters to sign a petition and then file it with the county clerk in Longhorn City. By half-past ten the same mornin' my energetic pardner is back with forty-nine names—and he's only had one refusal. That's from Artemus Squidge, general manager and chief and only teller of the Tanktown Cattleman's Bank. I ain't surprised, either. Grumpy Gordon is a stockholder in this bank, and besides, under Grumpy, there hasn't been a holdup in Tanktown in ages.

"Why don't *you* sign it?" suggests Windy, back at the Moosehead with his heel hooked into the identical same spot in the brass rail. "You're a citizen —you could do it."

"I could," I says firmly, "but I won't. And I hope you don't find anybody else that's loco enough to—"

He herds me impatiently through the batwing doors to the board walk. I goes, for his own safety and protection. There's no way of tellin' what fool thing he may do if left alone, and I had sorta promised his mother—

"Well," says Windy, "forty-nine signers ain't bad for a town of this size, considerin' I was only at it for about an hour."

"You got plenty signers all right," I admits. "But all them hombres done was sign their names, and what you're signin'—runnin' against old Grumpy Gordon—is your own danged death warrant! Anybody honin' to run *against* old Gordon—instead of *away* from him—must be plumb outa his head to start with."

"Say, look!" Windy grabs my arm, and points. "Here comes Gordon now!"

We stops at the hitch rack in front of the Cattle King Hotel and watches the grizzled old lawman come jouncin' up the street on his big bay geldin', Cricket. He pulls up in front of the hotel and creaks down outa the saddle. Pausin' a moment, he glares at McCarthy, then says, "harrrrrrump!" in kind of a warnin' voice and heads for his office and one-room jail in the little pine board buildin' next to the Cattle King.

"Come on," says Windy suddenly, "I got a scheme!"

Before I can stop him, he steps forward and lays a detainin' hand on old man's shirtsleeve!

"Howdy, marshal," says my rattlebrained pardner. "Like to talk to yuh a minute."

I forgot to mention, I guess, that in spite of his runt size Windham B. McCarthy has one remarkable and outstandin' attribute. Nerve!

The marshal whirls as though McCarthy has prodded him in the back

with a six-gun.

"If you aim to palaver with me," he barks, "come in my office. But git ready to high-tail if it's about Luella! I ain't got no time for saddle tramps.

WINDY follows the marshal into the little office and waits for Gordon to drop himself into a battered swivel chair behind his roll-topped desk. I trails in behind 'em, figurin' maybe I could give the marshal some help afterwards about the disposition of the body.

Windy pulls the petition out of his pocket and begins: "Marshal Gordon, for four years you, as peace officer of Tanktown, have give us Tanktowners a good honest administration and we'd be mighty ungrateful if we wasn't—er—grateful."

Grumpy Gordon's eyebrows lift a bit when he is pleased. They pop up now and his weather-beaten jowls crease in a pretty fair imitation of a smile.

"Harrrrumph!" He picks up a desk pen, scratches his head with it, then tucks it behind his right ear.

"So," continues Windy, clearin' his throat importantly, "as your popularity ain't never been questioned, me and Piccolo here has got the voters to sign a unanimous petition for the continuation of justice, law and order, but"—he adds after an impressive pause—"on a even bigger and better scale than previous."

The marshal's bushy gray eyebrows bob up again and he strokes his straggly mustache with a tolerant expression in his squinty blue eyes.

My pardner has no right ropin' me in on this crazy business, and right here is where I oughta paste him one on the kisser, but—

Windy lays the petition in front of the marshal.

"Marshal Gordon," he throbs, "it's no more'n right that your name should be added to the list of distinguished citizens signin' this paper, and here"—he points to the bottom of the petition—"we've reserved a special place for the signature of the most important and popular official in Poco Pisada County!"

The old goat falls for it. He says "harrrrumph," but then adds cautiously, "Well, it seems a mite unusual—"

"Why, dang it," cuts in Windy quickly, "this might even get to be a historic document like the Declaration of Independence and get hung some day down in the courthouse at Longhorn City."

"Right where you're gonna get hung," I mutters, givin' him a look that would curdle cream. The blasted fool winks at me.

"Now where's that danged pen o' mine?" worries the marshal, pokin' around in the papers on his desk. "Danged if I can keep track of a blasted—"

I see it was still behind his ear, but have sense enough to keep my lip buttoned because the old boy never likes to be reminded of his absent-mindedness. But that dumb pardner of mine busts right out with it.

"It's behind your ear, marshal—your right ear."

I figure the old walrus will start tearin' up the place then, but it looks as though that soft soap McCarthy has been handin' him has done its work. The marshal takes down the pen without a word and scrawls his name with a flourish!

" 'Scuse me, marshal," says Windy apologetically, "but you writ that on your memorandum pad. This here's the petition."

"Don't I know it?" This time the old horned toad really does flare up. "Anybody'd know I allus sign my name once for practice afore puttin' in down

permanent."

The marshal signs in the spot indicated by McCarthy's forefinger, then swings around in his swivel chair and faces us. "Well, now," he says in a pleased voice, "this is plumb civil o' you boys. Reckon I had you sized up wrong, McCarthy. But you and Piccolo here had oughta get yuh jobs, and then stick to 'em."

"We got a job in mind right now," says Windy, "and we're headin' for Longhorn City this afternoon to see about it." He tips me a wink. "Well, thanks marshal—and here's wishin' yuh all yuh deserve!"

The marshal could have put two meanin's on that, but bein' such a vain old goat, he naturally takes it as a bouquet.

I waits till I have that half-wit pardner of mine on the board walk, and then I lets him have it. "You oughta have your head examined," I states. "Any galoot that pulls what you just done oughta be makin' his arrangements with the undertaker right now."

"Nothin' ventured, nothin' gained," says McCarthy. "That's my motta!"

We seem to be walkin towards the railroad depot, and it reminds me of what McCarthy has just told the marshal about Longhorn City.

"What's this talk about us goin' to Longhorn City?" I asks.

"It's more'n talk," says McCarthy. "That's sure where we're goin'. This petition has to be filed with the county clerk before tomorra noon, and I ain't takin' no chances."

I give him a dirty laugh.

"That," says I, "is what *you* think!"

THE freight engine whistles, spearin' a white plume of steam into the blue, and with a clankin' and grindin' of rusty couplin's jerks the short string of box cars towards Dogie Flats and the desert. My pardner and me vaults through the open door of the last car as the train rattles over a siding switch and slowly picks up speed.

"This ain't exactly the kind of exit befittin' the next marshal of Tank town," Windy comments, cuffing the dust out of his pants, "but it'll save carfare and we can keep what *dinero* we got for campaign expenses."

"Yeah," I jeers, "and also for doctor bills when Grumpy Gordon finds out what he signed awhile back. If you wasn't so danged stuck on yourself you'd see that them folks signed that petition o' yours as a joke. They all wanta see what Grumpy does when he finds out you intend runnin' again him for marshal. Personally I'd rather not be around to see, you bein' a friend o' mine, kinda."

McCarthy ignores this turn of the conversation.

"Wish we could'a' waited to see what was the trouble around the bank just as we was leavin'," he says wistfully. "If it was a hold-up or somethin' I oughta been there. Maybe I could'a' got in some practice herdin' outlaws."

"What you're gonna catch ain't outlaws," I assures him. "And if I was you I'd—"

"All right," interrupts a harsh voice, "raise yer mittens!"

I swings around to see a tall, hard-jawed hombre steppin' out from behind a pile of packin' cases at the back of the car. He don't look like a very friendly party, even without that long-barreled .45 he is doin' calisthenics with.

Before we can say howdy to this bird, we have another visitor, a funny, hatchet-faced little fella who jumps out beside the first man and starts wavin' a gun.

"Save yer lead, Droopy," growls the tall one. "Wait till we find out what these hombres is doin' ridin' in our private coach."

The hatchet-faced man grumbles

somethin' I couldn't get, but it seems to me as if he is gettin' anxious to get ahead with his target practice.

Just then, however, my pardner wakes up and introduces us.

"Gents," he says hearty-like, "I'm plumb happy to make your acquaintance! I'm Windy McCarthy, formerly with the Bar BQ outfit, but just now travelin' for my health, and this here is Piccolo Peters, by pardner."

Our two visitors look at each other, then lower their artillery.

"Reckon they're all right," says the tall one, tuckin' his .45 back in the leather. "I'm Bill Mabie and this is Droopy Dildock. We been placer minin' up in the Bear Tooth Range an' struck some dirt. Headin' fer Longhorn City to git a little recreation."

I looks at his red nose and decides there is only one kind of recreation he would be interested in, but that numbskull pardner of mine seems set on cultivatin' these two birds.

"Pleased to meetcha," McCarthy says again. "Me and my pardner here is makin' a business trip to Longhorn City ourselves. We might as well be sociable."

I give McCarthy a look that oughta have singed his eyebrows, but the danged fool just grins and the next thing I know we are squatted on the floor bein' sociable with a deck of dog-eared playin' cards which Droopy drags outa his greasy vest.

McCarthy shuffles and deals and then says: "Didn't I see you two fellas drift out from Salter's livery and roll your tails towards this freight just as me and Piccolo was crossin' Main Street?"

Bill Mabie scowls. "Couldn't'a' been us," he says shortly.

"I'd'a' swore—" begins Windy.

Droopy Dildock jerks to his feet and yanks out his gun again.

"Yuh hear that?" he squeals. "He's insinuatin' you're a dog-gone liar, Bill!"

Mabie gets to his feet and bats down the gun.

"Shut up!" he says harshly. He turns to Windy and me. "Don't mind Droopy, boys," he growls. "He gits as proddy sometimes as a old maid with spring fever."

I don't like the way these birds are actin', but that addle-brained peanut I'd taken for a pardner evidently thinks they are all right. "No apologies necessary," he says with a big-hearted wave of the hand. "All of us fly off the handle at times." And he looks at me.

However, the card game is definitely off. When Hatchet-face has scrambled to his feet, he has scattered the cards all over the floor of the box car, and some of them have blown out through the open side doors.

I can hear the engine puffin', and realize we are almost at the top of Two Mile Grade, the toughest part of the twenty mile run to Longhorn City. Droopy Dildock has gone back to the packin' cases and is now sittin' on one, sulkin'.

"It's his dyspepsia," explains Bill Mabie. "Every time he eats horse radish—"

He is interrupted by a sudden joltin' of the car and a loud hissin' of compressed air.

Windy sticks his head out through the door and gives a gasp.

"What's wrong?" demands Bill Mabie.

"Our car," McCarthy answers hoarsely. "The couplin's busted, and we're coastin' back towards Tanktown!"

FOR a while it looks like the car may get out of hand, jump the rails at the freight sidin', and plow up Main Street right through the doors of the Moosehead! That, I think, will be convenient for the passengers, but maybe not for the management of the Moosehead.

Solly Weizenheimer has loaded many a customer in his day, but he might have his hands full, loadin' a box car! Anyway, it ain't necessary. Bill Mabie boosts me up to the roof and I set the handbrake, bringin' the car to a grindin' stop only a few yards from the Tanktown station.

As I climb down the little iron ladder at the end of the car I notice Mabie and Dildock in a huddle. I can't hear what they are sayin' but Mabie is pointin' one way, and Dildock another. Dildock seems excited, and Mabie is apparently tryin' to calm him down.

"Well, gents," Windy says, "what d'you say to a little refreshment at the Moosehead?"

I can tell that Droopy Dildock is gettin' ready to say no, but Mabie kicks him in the shins and that shuts him up. We reach the Moosehead and McCarthy calls loudly for Solly to provide four lagers—with light portions of froth. Solly serves the beer, and with it, some information.

"Don't know where you fellas've been," he begins eagerly, "but yuh sure missed some excitement. Cattleman's Bank got held up—two gents wearin' bandannas across their faces."

Windy pricks up his ears.

"Ol' Squidge," Solly goes on, "says he could reckernize one of 'em by the voice—kind of a whiney little cuss. Lucky for you, Gordon's off lookin' for 'em now. He was lookin' for you and Piccolo afore it happened."

"Tell the marshal," McCarthy says airily, "that if he needs some advice on ropin' outlaws, I'm his man."

"Yeah," I says, "you're his man all right—when he finds out yuh got his signature on false pretenses."

Droopy Dildock starts to say somethin', but Bill Mabie stops him by another kick in the shins.

Windy lifts his stein and washes his tonsils. Bill Mabie and his hatchet-faced pardner have polished off their beers and now are wipin' out the taste with a couple of ryes for chasers.

Windy explains confidentially to Mabie: "The trouble with Grumpy Gordon is, he ain't got no dee-ducktive ability. Now I wouldn't be surprised myself if them two robbers is layin' low right here in town."

I notice that Droopy Dildock looks at Mabie quick, and I began wonderin'—

The batwing doors swings inward, and Marshal Grumpy Gordon stomps in. The marshal's bandy legs are planted about a yard apart, and a hogleg almost as big as a cannon is bristlin' in his right fist.

Bill Mabie spots the lawman almost at the same time I do, and for a minute it seems like I see Mabie slip somethin' in Windy's pocket. Then I decide I'm mistaken, and forget about it. I suddenly have a lot of other things to occupy my mind.

Trailed by his lanky deputy, Ollie Jensen, the marshal walks over to the bar and claps a horny hand on the shoulder of his rival for the marshal's job.

"McCarthy," he announces in a loud voice, "you're under arrest for fraud—gittin' a signature under false pretenses!" He turns to me and growls: "You'll have to come too, Peters. You was with him when he done it."

"But—" begins Windy.

"Ain't no 'buts' about it this time," snaps Grumpy Gordon. "Comin' peaceable, or do I gotta charge yuh with resistin' arrest, too?"

"He'll come peaceable," I promised him, "or take that sock on the jaw I should'a' give him in the first place."

"The marshal grunts, then says to his deputy: "Watch 'em a minute, Ollie." He whirls around on Bill Mabie and Droopy Dildock. "Sorry, gents, but I'll have to search yuh both. Had a rob-

bery in town, and I can't let no pilgrims through without a search."

Droopy Dildock opens his yap to protest, but Bill Mabie promptly shuts it for him. He gives Droopy another kick in the shins.

"Why, sure, marshal," says Mabie agreeably, "go right ahead and search. Me and my pardner here is prospectors in from the Bear Tooth country. We ain't got nothin' to hide."

The marshal goes quickly through their pockets but apparently finds nothin' incriminatin' because he says: "Sorry to have bothered you gents." Then he turns to Jensen, McCarthy and me. "Herd 'em along in back of me, Ollie. I gotta get some jail grub." We trail him two doors down from the saloon to a lunch room from the front of which hangs a sign readin': "EATS—Come & Get it!" The marshal steps inside, and while we wait on the doorstep I hear him order a loaf of bread, two cans of beans, and, in a sudden burst of generosity, two hunks of alleged peach pie.

He don't seem to notice Mabie and Dildock follow us across the street to the clink, but I do. Them two hombres slink along behind us like a couple of ghosts.

AT THE door of his office the marshal dismisses Ollie Jensen and takes us in alone. He hauls down a tray from a shelf back of his desk, then escorts us to the little one-cell jail in the rear. There he takes out his key ring, unlocks the grilled door of the cell, then lays the keys on the tray as he shoves the door inward and steps inside.

He puts the tray on one of the two wooden bunks in the cell. "There's your chuck," he says stiffly, and turns his back on us.

He slams the door and stomps out. Then we hear him shut the door to the outside office. As his footsteps fade on the board walk, Windy lets out a gasp.

"Well now, will yuh look at that!" He is gazin' down at the dinner tray.

"You look at it," I says coldly. "I ain't hungry."

McCarthy is always hungry; for a little hombre, I never see anybody that can tuck in the chuck the way he can. "Them beans don't look bad atall," he says, lookin' things over carefully, "and another thing about 'em is they're free gratis. And that pie—"

A sudden glint from the tray catches my eye, and that glint ain't made by no pie. "Look," I points. "On the tray there. That absent-minded old jigadee forgot to take his keys!"

My pardner stares. Then he turns toward the door, and he is starin' at somethin' else—the black holes of a pair .45s, slantin' down at him through the bars!

Behind those guns are Bill Mabie and Droopy Dildock, and the way Mabie is swishin' the air with his gun there ain't no "maybe" about it. He jabs that gun towards Windy. "Peel off your coat," he barks. "I need it!"

My pardner needs it too, but lookin' into the business end of that .45 he decides that Bill Mabie might need it more'n he did. He takes it off and hands it through the bars, lookin' puzzled.

Mabie lowers his gun then, but Droopy is squintin' along the barrel of his cutter as if he is ponderin' the possibility of droppin' the both of us with one shot.

Mabie gives him a shove. "Go on, dang yuh! And put up that gun afore yuh rouse up the whole blasted town with it!" He pushes Dildock again. They disappear into the office, and then the outside door slams.

"Come on," McCarthy yells, "after 'em! That big one's got my petition,

the buzzard! Gordon must'a' hired him to steal it! Come on!"

I grab the keys, but find when I try the door that it's unlocked anyway! Havin' forgot the keys, Grumpy has held true to form and forgot to lock the door! I give it a push, and Windy and me come out like water pourin' over a dam.

We grab our guns on the run and head for the front door. McCarthy gets there first and yanks so hard the knob comes off in his hand. He leans out and throws it right after Mabie and Dildock.

"There they go!" he hollers. "Come on—after 'em!" He starts dashin' right out of that door and would've done it, except that I reach out and drag him back by the seat of the britches.

"You loco?" I snarls. "Them two hombres is liable to shoot."

Two horses is tied to the hitch rail in front of the hotel—Gordon's and Ollie Jensen's—and Mabie and Dildock are leggin' it towards 'em as fast as their boots can kick up dust. At the sound of Windy's yell, however, they pull up and stare back pop-eyed with astonishment. Droopy's gun is liftin' when my pardner fires from the hip.

Dust spurts up at them outlaws' feet and breaks 'em outa their tracks like a pair of startled jackrabbits. They start firin' wildly all over the place, and duck behind the horses which are rearin' up on their hind legs. A crowd starts pourin' out of the Moosehead and somebody on the porch of the hotel begins yellin' murder.

Takin' advantage of the uproar and my loosened grip on the seat of his pants McCarthy leaps from the jail door and flattens out in a gully alongside the board walk. I dive right after him like a bull-frog goin' after a minnow.

Windy's smoke-pole lets go with a regular broadside as he hits the ditch, but that's about all he does hit, outside of maybe one or two Moosehead customers who are a little slow divin' back into the saloon. McCarthy ain't discouraged that easy, though. He tries a second salvo, and there is a mass retreat off the veranda of the hotel.

"Can't seem to get the range," McCarthy complains irritably.

My right ear is practically outa commission by now as a result of his bombardment. "You'll get the range if you're not carefuler," I yelps. "You'll get the whole danged Poco Pisada Range!"

Droopy Dildock is returnin' Windy's fire while Mabie is tryin' to quiet the spooky cayuses, but the more he fires, the more them horses rears and bucks.

Lookin' up the street, I lets out a yell of alarm. A woman is drivin' down towards us—a woman in an old rattletrap of a buckboard—headin' straight into the line of fire! Windy sees her at the same time, and jumps up wavin' his arms wildly.

"Luella!" he bawls. "Turn around! Go back! *Go on back!*"

BUT Luella Gordon, sittin' in the middle of that saggin' old buckboard, don't seem to savvy her danger in time. She is tryin' to pull up her bronc when Bill Mabie springs up alongside of her and grabs the reins outa her hands. He whips up the knock-kneed old skate and at the same time Droopy Dildock gives a flyin' jump and scrambles aboard from the back. The overloaded wagon rocks crazily down the street. The bronc is gallopin' straight for Sneed's Grain & Feed Store, scatterin' dust like a stampedin' steer. Twenty feet from the loadin' platform of the feed store the skinny old flybait veers suddenly and slams right through the gate adjoinin' the buildin'.

The gate is just wide enough to let the horse through, but not the buckboard. There is a sound like a whip crack as the harness snaps, and a crunchin' sound as the whiffletree splinters like kindlin' against the sides of the gate. The buckboard upends and hurls all three passengers into a nearby hay mow.

By now half of Tanktown is runnin' after the runaway, with me and my pardner in the lead. McCarthy skids up to the hay mow just as the hatchet face of Droopy Dildock comes pokin' out and looks around in a kind of daze. Windy shoots out his fist, and Droopy never comes out of the fog.

Then Luella and Bill Mabie come crawlin' out of the hay, and I have to haul McCarthy back so he won't go for the big bird too. I get hold of the backside of his britches with my left hand, and with my right pull out my smoke-pole and bounce a fast one off Mabie's top-knot. Mabie sags back in the hay with a contented sigh.

"Gosh, Luella," blurts Windy, "yuh sure do look fancy with your yella hair all mussed up thataway!"

Luella swings her arm kittenishly, and it catches my pardner square on the kisser. Down he goes, out like a light in only the first or second round.

"Now yuh done it!" I bleat. "If yuh gotta spark, whyn't yuh play gentle?"

"It was just a love tap," Luella Gordon says regretfully. "Why—"

"I'd hate to see you get a real cravin' for a man," I mutters. I am bendin' over the fallen gladiator, tryin' to bring him to. "If that was a love tap, no tellin' what'd happen yuh got really b'iled up over a fella."

Windy still looks kind of dazed, but I get him on his feet just as Marshal Grumpy Gordon stomps through the busted gate, followed by Ollie Jensen, Artemus Squidge and half the population of Tanktown.

The marshal stares hard at McCarthy and me and scratches his head. "I could'a' swore I arrested you two," he mutters. "Well, if I forgot it, yo're under arrest right now!"

He turns to Luella and points at the outstretched figures of Mabie and Dildock. "Hope yuh didn't damage 'em none," he says. "I gotta bring them in, too. Disturbin' the peace."

My pardner takes advantage of this tender domestic scene to step across to the huddled form of Bill Mabie with the object in view of retrievin' his stolen petition. His coat is there alongside the unconscious miner, and as he picks it up and feels in the left hand pocket his hand closes on somethin' that brings a funny look to his face. He takes out his hand and stares open-mouthed at a thick bundle of bank notes.

Nature ain't give my pardner any very heavy amount of brains, but he can add up two and two and get four. A bank has been robbed, and here is an hombre with a bankroll big enough to choke a horse. All right, this bozo might be a bank robber!

Windy steps over to Artemus Squidge and slaps the bills into the banker's palm.

"Mr. Squidge," he announces dramatically, "there's the *dinero* which was stole from your bank!" He turns to the gapin' marshal and motions towards the flattened outlaws. "Marshal," he says, "arrest them two jaspers! They're the outlaws robbed the Tanktown Bank! I been on their trail all afternoon—even after you throwed me and Piccolo in jail for tryin' to give yuh a little perfessional assistance."

Suddenly Droopy Dildock stirs and mutters in a whinin' voice: "Damn it, Bill, where's my iron? I told yuh—"

Artemus Squidge gives a shout. "That's him! That little one! I'd

know his voice anywheres. Threatened to shoot me! Arrest him!"

The marshal clears his throat and turns to McCarthy, who is standin' with his chest pushed out enjoyin' the admiration of the gallery and especially the shy, flutterin' glances of Luella. "Son," he confesses reluctantly, "I shore gotta give yuh credit. I—yessir, I plumb have." The old man looks as though he is gonna break down and cry.

"Shucks, that's all right," says Windy big-heartedly. "You'd'a' done all right if it'd been a minor case, maybe."

SOMEBODY in the crowd yells, "Windy McCarthy—our next marshal!" and the top button of Windy's shirt flys off with a pop.

"Pull in your chest," I whispers. "Yuh wanta lose all your buttons?"

Just then there is a long blast of a train whistle, and Windy gives a jump. The 5:10 is leavin' the depot—and it's the last train to Longhorn City before tomorrow. And tomorrow will be too late to file his petition for marshal.

Windy jerks up an arm.

"One minute, gents!" he cries. "I wanta take this here opportunity to announce I'm withdrawin' from the race for marshal of Tanktown! And I think that with the experience gained from observin' my methods in this case, our friend Gordon here will make a pretty middlin' lawman, in time."

The marshal's bushy eyebrows twitch up. "Son," he says sadly, "guess I done yuh an injustice. Too bad they ain't no reward on these hombres, but" —he glances meanin'ly towards Luella, who is blushin' like a Poco Pisada sunset—"reckon mebbeso you'll git another kind o' reward, eh son?"

At this sinister remark, I grab my pardner by the sleeve and move him fast out of the crowd. "If I got anythin' to say," I states emphatically, "that there's one reward you ain't never gonna collect!"

Poor Windy fingers his sore chin very gingerly.

"Maybe you're right," he says.

Then he pauses and looks back. "But if you'd ever tasted her maple sugar buscuits—!"

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By

RAYMOND W. PORTER

Author of "Hang Your Gun Low, Hellion!", etc.

It was Dodge City, home of hot lead law—no town for a green button who'd never learned how to handle a gun . . .

He doubled up his fists and sent one of them crashing into Lobo's jaw!

THE little locomotive with the big smokestack screamed a warning to train crew and passengers, as six horsemen raced out of the gulley alongside the track.

Reverend Joseph C. Leland heard the shrill whistle and he saw the riders, but his mind refused to accept the obvious and alarming fact that he was about to become involved in a train robbery. It was unthinkable, with that mind of his, fresh out of the theological seminary. A well-ordered, alert, and serious mind it was, but completely oc-

cupied with a gigantic problem of its own—that of bringing religion to the West. It couldn't be expected to cope with anything so lurid and unconventional as this.

He stared through the dusty pane of glass at his elbow into the dusk of evening which had fallen like a sinister curtain over the vast plains of Western Kansas. He watched the string of horsemen converge on the locomotive, saw one of them swing from his saddle and disappear into the engine cab. He heard a pistol shot, muffled by the fearful chattering of iron trucks and couplings. The wooden coach shuddered, swayed, and came to a halt.

Reverend Joe Leland looked around at his fellow passengers. There were grim stubbled beards and large placid sombreros. There were hard inquiring eyes, and down the aisle the butt of a sixgun protruded from a beefy thigh.

When he had boarded the train in Kansas City and looked on these men for the first time, Joe had felt a great sorrowful uneasiness. He had realized that these were the kinds of men he was going to have to convert. They were stolid, and tough, and sure of themselves. Joe imagined himself trying to preach to a congregation like this, and he knew what a terrific task it would be.

But now he felt a surge of reassurance. Men like these would not make up a choice congregation, but they would do very well for the present emergency. They would surely not submit passively to being robbed.

A small gray beaver hat, riding high on the top of a mass of black gleaming hair caught his eye—not for the first time that day. He had forced himself to keep his eyes away from it, and several times an alluring bit of lace just below the hat had distracted his most profound thinking.

This was the only girl in the car, and she held her head with a queer erect thrust, as if she were warding off every staring eye. There had been plenty to ward off—a constant barrage, in fact, and Joe had resented them. At the same time he had resented *her,* for being a distracting influence, and for traveling alone. There was no excuse for a girl like that to be traveling alone. Besides it was dangerous—

And now it *was* dangerous! There would be shooting—

Joe jumped from his seat and hastened down the aisle, the tail of his long black coat flapping in a thoroughly undignified manner. He snatched off his tall silk hat as he thrust himself into the seat beside the girl.

"Please be calm," he whispered.

The spurt down the aisle, of the thought of the girl's being in danger had sent his heart to pounding violently. He caught a whiff of perfume and a glimpse of startled dark eyes and rounded red lips, and he was amazed at himself. Only a train robbery, or some other cataclysmic occurrence, could have caused him to get so close to a strange creature like this. The lace at her throat was so thin he could see right through it, and he knew then why she was traveling alone. She was surely in league with the Devil.

Yet, she was a defenseless girl, and when the bullets started flying, he would protect her! He would save her life, and after that he would save her soul.

Joe was not given to heroics or impulsiveness of this kind. He had lived for twenty-four years in a state of calm, serene, and rather grim earnestness. He had a goal in life and, six months ago, he had achieved the first step towards that goal—receiving his ordination papers as a minister of the Gospel. Hereafter, his life would be devoted entirely to serving mankind and bringing them to the Faith.

BUT by no stretch of the imagination had he expected to begin his service to mankind so melodramatically. He was confused and astonished at his own actions and secretly a little bit pleased.

Two men appeared in the doorway of the coach with drawn guns. One of them said: "Everybody git your hands up and stay where you're at!"

In amazement, Joe watched the other passengers obediently raise their hands. Not a one of these tough looking travelers made any other move or sound.

"You, tinhorn!" The bandit spokesman raised his voice. "Get 'em up!"

He was looking straight at Joe. Tinhorn? Joe thought. Does he take me to be a gambler? "I," said Joe, in a full distinct voice well trained for public speaking, "am a minister."

The bandit stared bleakly. He had a peculiar round face, shaved cleanly to the ridge of his jaws and chin, with beard growing the rest of the way down his neck. It looked as though his oval mushroom head was sprouting from a mass of yellowish gray vegetation. "A what?"

"A minister," Joe repeated, gaining confidence. Joe was proud of his calling, and the privileges that he enjoyed. Although he had been a minister but six months and was now on his way to his first pastorate, he was getting accustomed to the general deference with which he was regarded by most other men. There were those who scoffed at him, of course, but they were only trying to cover up their inner fears and emptiness.

"You mean a Parson? What in hell you doin' in Kansas?"

A slight movement ran through the crowd, a lessening of tension, even some signs of amusement.

"I'm on my way to my pastorate in Dodge City," Joe said calmly. He was feeling more and more in command of this unorthodox situation.

He noticed that the girl at his side was showing less signs of fear. She was huddling close to him. She knew he would protect her.

"A Parson in Dodge City!" the bandit said. "God-o-mighty!"

He said it almost reverently. A rather fanatical impulse gripped Joe. There was a Power strong enough to overcome this train robber. It was the power of the Holy Ghost. That Power was very strong in Joe at this moment, stronger than ever before. He found himself saying; "Lay down your gun! I command you in the name of God!"

The bandit's gun actually wavered. The muzzle swung slightly to one side. And then it roared with a tremendous, astounding explosion.

A man across the aisle from Joe made a choking, slithering noise as he slid downward.

"Go on, Parson," the bandit encouraged. "I like to hear you talk. Of course, I gotta keep my eye on the congregation to see that they pay close attention. That member was lettin' his mind wander. He thought he could get hold of his gun."

The man on the floor was moaning. "I ain't got no—gun!"

"Oh, ain't you?" The bandit was politely regretful. "My mistake. You was making a move like you might be tryin' to get hold of a gun. The rest of you members keep still now, and pay attention to the Parson. You say you're goin' to start a church in Dodge? Well, well! Are you goin' to take up collections?"

Joe was stupefied. He could not conceive of such brutality, such utter disregard of human life and the power of God.

"If you're goin' to be takin' up collection," the robber-chief went on, "watch the way we do it, Parson. It's the best system you ever seen."

One of his companions started down the aisle with a gun in his hand, collecting pocketbooks. Another was standing at the rear door of the coach, helping the leader keep a watch on the passengers.

"See how it works, Parson? Slick as a whistle."

Joe felt his knees trembling. His stomach rolled sickeningly. "The Lord will punish you," he said hollowly, then added with still more hollowness, "May the Lord have mercy on your soul!"

"You prayin' for me," Parson?" asked the bandit. "I reckon it's the first time anybody ever prayed for me and I'm much obliged for your prayers, and your pocketbook too. Just hand it to the Deacon there."

THE "Deacon" was grinning impiously. He glanced at the girl with narrowed eyes. "That's a purty ring you got, Lady," he said. "I got a girl in K.C. would like to have that."

The girl quickly covered the large diamond ring on her finger with her other hand. "No! Please! My mother —gave it to me!" It was the first time she had spoken, and her voice was the first human sound Joe had heard. All the rest had been diabolical sounds from another world.

"Don't break my heart that way!" said the "Deacon" roughly. He reached in front of Joe and grabbed the girl's hand.

Suddenly, unexplainably, Joe was again filled with the power of the Holy Ghost—or something. He grabbed the hand that held the gun. It was a powerful hand. But so was Joe's.

In the grip of the two hands, the gun turned first toward Joe and then toward the other man. Slowly, Joe forced the muzzle away, and now it was pressed beneath his adversary's chin. The man's mouth was open in a horrible grimace, and his eyes were closed. His fingers slipped slightly and Joe's hand was now wrapped more securely around the gun. His thumb found a steel curve into which it fitted perfectly. It was the thumb hold on the hammer. But the hammer came back, and now it was sliding out from under his thumb.

He felt the shudder of the gun, then heard a terrific explosion. The shudder was not just in the gun. It was in the body of the man. The bottom part of his face was blown away.

Other explosions broke all around Joe, and the railway coach seemed to shudder and sway. Joe got into the aisle. He still had the gun. He started toward the front end of the car, where he knew the bandit leader was—but the bandit leader wasn't there.

Joe ran out on the platform and vaguely saw the forms of riders disappearing into the dusk. He was shoved aside, and he stood listening to the shouting and the cursing.

"Where's the Parson?" someone shouted.

Joe didn't answer. He wanted to get rid of the gun, but he was jammed into a little corridor, and couldn't get away. He couldn't drop the gun without dropping it on somebody's foot. So he held it, the gun with which he had blown off a man's head.

"The Parson broke it up! Hurray for the Parson!"

Joe tried to wedge farther back, where he couldn't be seen, but someone shouted, "Here he is! Here's the Parson!"

They cleared a little space around him, and he still couldn't find any place to put the gun. He concealed it beneath the tail of his long black coat, slipping it under the waistband of his trousers.

They shook his hand and congratulated him, and he stared at them in wonder. What kind of world was this, where killing was a cause for congratu-

lations?

Joe knew that killing was a cardinal sin, expressly condemned by the sixth commandment. He had committed that sin, and broken that commandment. He was aghast at what he had done.

And yet, underneath all this, there was growing in him a secret sense of power and pleasure in his own accomplishment. He tried to ignore it, for it dismayed him almost as much as what he had done. Not only had he killed a man, but he was finding a sort of pleasure in having done so!

He pushed his way through the crowd of admiring men. He could feel the bulk of the sixgun, this weapon with which he had committed the crime, and he thought distractedly: What am I going to do with it? I must get rid of it!

But immediately his new self-acquired sense of power objected: With this gun you are able to overcome the forces of evil. You challenged them with the word of God and they laughed at you. But when you used this instrument of force, they were defeated. Keep it!

He caught sight of the girl, hovering at one end of the car, and he forgot the gun. She obviously needed someone to comfort her, after such an experience.

"Wouldn't you rather go back to the next car?" he asked deferentially. Whatever she might be, she was a woman, and a very young and charming one.

"Thank you," she said gratefully.

HE LED the way to the rear coach and found it practically deserted. "Sit down," he said, a bit austerely, "and tell me—why are you traveling alone?"

"I'm on my way to Dodge City to see my mother," she said rapidly. "She doesn't know I'm coming—I wanted to surprise her."

Joe was revising his first estimate of this girl. If she was on her way to see her mother, she couldn't be so very bad.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"I've been going to school at Vassar. Mother lives at Dodge City."

Vassar! Joe flushed with shame at what he had been thinking. "Vassar!" he said. "I had no idea—" He stopped before making it any worse.

She smiled a little. It was meant to be a primly correct, Vassar smile, but it made her lips very alluring.

"I want to thank you," she said, "for —doing what you did."

He remembered, then, what he had done. He felt all the remorse again, and all the queer power, and he felt the gun. "I'm very sorry," he said, "that it—happened. It did just happen, you know. I hardly know how."

"I don't either. I was so scared I couldn't see," she confessed.

"I didn't know exactly what I was doing. When he touched you, I—I lost my head." It would be easy for a man to lose his head over this girl. He must remember that he was a minister.

But his other self, the one he had discovered only a few moments ago, wouldn't have it this way. What if you are a minister? asked his other self. You're a man. You're twenty-four years old. You've worked all your life to get to be a minister, with no thought of women. You have a right to enjoy the companionship of women. You have a right to marry.

Here was fresh and deeper confusion. He had killed a man ten minutes ago, and now he was thinking about marrying a woman! What in the name of Heaven had taken hold of him?

"I'm glad you're going to Dodge City, too," said the girl. "And I hope you'll let me join your church."

His church. He wasn't fit to establish a church. He would resign his

pastorate. He would surrender his ordination papers. "I'm afraid," he said bitterly, "that I won't."

She flushed. "I'm not very—pious," she admitted.

He looked at her gravely. "You are far more pious than I. You haven't broken the Lord's Commandments, have you?"

"N-no—"

"You haven't committed murder, have you?"

"Oh! Oh, you mustn't look at it that way. You did only what any man would have done—"

"No man has the right to take a human life." He was getting a savage satisfaction in condemning himself, but, perversely enough, he was feeling more and more satisfied with what he had done.

"Not to protect other human lives?" she countered.

"Well—" he said, at last, "I confess I don't know. There's just one thing for me to do—leave it up to the presiding elder and the bishop."

As he thought about grim old Elder Franklin, he knew he could expect no leniency or approval for any act of his. Joe had once denounced Elder Franklin for his bigotry. This was one reason he had been "exiled" to Dodge City.

Bishop Sturm would be fair, and yet—

A stocky man with red hair and sideburns and brightly gleaming, widely spaced eyes appeared at the door. "I've been looking everywhere for you!" he said, as though Joe should have reported to him before this.

He pushed his hat back a little farther on his head. "I'm Cannon Lewis, editor of the Dodge City Times. Are you the Parson that Colonel Charter sent for?"

I'm Reverend Leland of the Kansas Conference," said Joe. "Colonel Charter was largely instrumental in having a pastor assigned to Dodge City, I believe."

"Lord, what a story!" Cannon Lewis exulted. "Dodge City Parson Downs Lobo Desperado!"

"Downed who?" asked Joe uncertainly.

"One of Lobo's gang."

"Lobo?"

"Sure. That was him with the fuzzy neck. He wears hair on his neck to cover up a scar where he had his throat cut once."

"I take it," said Joe, "that this Lobo is a well known character in this country."

"Very well known, brother."

"Then why doesn't somebody arrest him?"

LEWIS grinned. "Looks that simple, doesn't it? But it's not, Parson, believe me. You may find Lobo walking the streets of Dodge, Parson. He's there often enough—yes, I'd say you'll be pretty sure to see him there. He'll want to see you again, no doubt."

The newspaperman was scribbling on a pad of folded paper.

"I hope," said Joe anxiously, "you will not find it necessary to write an article about this—incident for the public press."

But Cannon Lewis was already writing it. "What's your name? . . . Is this your wife? . . . Then your sweetheart? . . . Oh, you never saw her before? Better yet. You're not married, are you, Parson? . . . What's your name, Miss?"

The girl looked distressed. "I wish you wouldn't mention my name, please. I'd probably be expelled if my name got into the papers."

"Expelled from what? . . . Great! What did you say your name was?"

"She didn't say," Joe interposed ominously. "And I won't have her annoyed."

"Take it easy, Parson. I'm not going to annoy the little lady. But I've got to know what her name is, just for the record. It'll all come out, anyway, when the sheriff quizzes you."

The sheriff! The word reminded Joe again of his "crime."

"Where you traveling to, lady?" the newspaperman began again. "To Dodge? What for? . . . What's your mother's name?"

"Mrs. Stevens," said the girl.

"Stevens?" Cannon Lewis scribbled the name and frowned in concentration. "I don't believe I know her."

"She's in the real estate business there."

"Real estate business? A woman? Mrs. Stevens? You sure you're not joking me, lady?"

"Of course not!"

Lewis shook his head. "Well—we'll see."

The car began filling up with passengers, and the train started. Above the resultant noise, Cannon Lewis continued his questioning.

The girl insisted her name was Amy Stevens and that her mother was in the real estate business in Dodge City, but Lewis made no attempt to conceal his skepticism on this point.

As the train slowed down for the next stop, Lewis waved his paper. "Got to get my story on the wire—they'll be taking the bodies off here, I guess—"

The bodies! The sheriff! Joe hunched down in the seat. The gun pressed hard against his side, as he remembered what Cannon Lewis had said about the likelihood of his meeting the bandit Lobo again.

He guessed he would keep the gun . . .

The little locomotive s h r i l l e d a wheezy greeting to Dodge City, as brakemen thrust sticks into brake wheels at the end of each car. Stock pens drifted by, and a dull red depot drew abreast. Joe helped Amy Stevens with her luggage down the steps through the crowd.

"Ah! Brother Leland?"

The speaker was a large man with pink jowls and thin gray hair. He was meticulously complete, with stand-up collar and gray satin tie. "I am Colonel Charter," he announced pompously.

As he shook hands with Joe he glanced with hard little eyes at Amy.

"This is Miss Stevens," said Joe.

The Colonel stared at the girl, and Joe felt he had to make some more explanations. "Her mother lives here," he said, defensively.

"Do you know her—Mrs. Mary Stevens?" Amy asked.

The pink jowls of the Colonel were turning a mottled color. "Why—no—I don't believe I do."

There was an awkward silence, after which the Colonel led the way around the depot across a bare stretch of ground, rutted and dusty, that lay between the tracks and the file of dull, lead-colored stores that were the business section of Dodge.

A brisk wind whipped dust across the open square. A freighter's wain, drawn by yoked oxen, crept along the street. An astonishing array of ponies and wagons lined the hitching racks on the north side of the plaza.

"Yonder's the Dodge House," said the Colonel, "but I recommend the Iowa House, down the street."

HE IGNORED Amy, who followed along uncertainly. "I'll surely find someone there who knows my mother," she said. "I had no idea Dodge City was such a big place."

The crowds on the street and the confusion in general matched Joe's swirling thoughts. His duty was plain. He had killed a man. He could no longer call himself a minister of that Gospel which forbade violence and hatred. He would have to resign. He

would have to give up the thing he had struggled so many years to obtain, and which would make life for him meaningless and empty.

He knew that he ought to explain this to the Colonel, but the Colonel was a man who did not inspire confidences.

The lobby of the Iowa House was bare and cheerless. The vertical boards that made up the outer walls provided as well the interior finish. From behind the narrow desk, a wizened, bald-headed man thrust out a startled head, like the head of a turtle emerging from its shell.

"Ezzie," said the Colonel, "let us have a decent room for Reverend Leland."

Amy waited till Joe had registered, then moved up diffidently to the desk. "Do you know a Mrs. Mary Stevens here?" she asked.

Ezzie's startled eyes flickered. "You don't mean—"

"Never mind, Ezzie!" The Colonel spoke sharply. "I'll—help this young woman find her mother."

Engrossed as he was with his own problem, Joe could not keep his thoughts off Amy's predicament. It was obvious to him that the Colonel knew something about Amy's mother, which he had not divulged.

"Just sit down over there, young woman," said the Colonel sharply. "I will talk to you in a moment."

"Number 10," said Ezzie, dropping a key on the counter. "Right up them steps. We got the doors numbered."

The Colonel extended a hand gone soft and clammy. "I shall expect you to supper at my house tonight," he said, without giving Joe a chance to be heard on the subject. "Go to your room and wait for me there."

Joe felt like a small boy, summarily dismissed. Before he could reply, the Colonel turned away and crossed the lobby to a row of chairs, where Amy was waiting.

"I'd like to send a telegram," Joe told the hotel man.

"Depot's across the street," said Ezzie, adding with a malicious little s n i c k e r, "That's where the train stopped."

An impulse to reach across the desk and grab the fellow by the neck swept over Joe. He turned away hastily, again shocked by this new savage instinct he was discovering in himself. Underneath all of his education and his piety he realized there was something explosive and violent, over which he seemed to have very little control. He had killed a man, and now he was about to punch a hotel clerk in the nose.

He recrossed the plaza to the depot and sent a telegram to Bishop Sturm. "Resigning pastorate. Letter follows."

Back at the hotel, he found both the Colonel and Amy gone. He climbed the steps somberly and found a door into which had been burned, as though with a branding iron, the number 10.

The door of Number 11 opened and Amy Stevens appeared. "I—I just wanted you to know I'm your neighbor," she said, with a worried little smile . . . "I asked to be put next to your room. I hope you don't mind."

Mind? All the heavy-hearted sluggishness was suddenly gone. Joe's blood warmed. Hope came back into the world. "Of course not," he said. "I am delighted!"

She shrank away from him, and he saw that his impetuousness had again manifested itself, this time in a new direction, but almost as dangerous. He remembered that he was a preacher—at least, so far as this girl knew. "I was just a bit surprised," he faltered. "I thought that you had gone with the Colonel to find your mother."

"He promised to find her for me. He seemed to remember something about her, and said he thought she was out of

town. He insisted that I take this room. The men downstairs were staring at me so—"

"Who stared at you?" Joe demanded. He would take a poke at anybody who stared at her.

"Why—nobody in particular," she said, and then smiled more warmly. Joe's temperature went up another notch. He struggled valiantly to hold onto his fast slipping ministerial dignity. "I hope you find your mother," he said solemnly, "and—may the Lord bless you."

HE PUSHED into his room, his ears burning. A rockety bed with knobby mattress, a rope bottomed chair, a wash stand and a bureau were the furnishings. A luxury-artistic note was added with a rag rug and two pictures of the Philadelphia Centennial, cut from Harper's Weekly, unframed and curling away from the raw pine walls as though in tortured agony.

The window overlooked the plaza, where dusty sombreros jostled tall silk hats and derbies. A tiny, flower-bedecked hat glided past, followed by a bright sun bonnet, then the black head of an Indian squaw. A gold-headed cane glistened on the sleeve of a cutaway coat, by the side of a stiff military shoulder of buff and blue. There was a clatter of hoofs and three riders slid to a stop in front of the hotel, three legs clad in leather chaps swung over saddle cantles in unison, and the shining wooden handles of three six-shooters flashed into view.

Joe remembered the gun he had thrust into his own belt. He took it out and looked at the thing in horror. What would he do with it? He must get rid of it right away!

He would find the sheriff and turn it over to him. He would make a clean breast of everything. They would probably arrest him.

As he opened the door, he almost collided with a man who stood there, apparently on the point of entering.

It was Lobo, the desperado!

For an instant, Joe's surprise and astonishment held him silent and motionless. His astonishment increased as Lobo's hands went up. "All right," growled the train-robber. "You got me!"

What in the world was he talking about? Joe became conscious of the gun in his hand. It was pointed directly at the big outlaw's belly. Joe gulped. He didn't know what to do or say.

"W-what are you doing here?" he asked.

The round face, sprouting from the yellowish-gray, hairy neck, wrinkled slightly in perplexity. "Nothin'," he said, moistening his lips. "Nothin' at all. I was just—lookin' for my room."

Joe's amazement increased. "You are a guest at this hotel? After you murdered a man and robbed a train—you have the nerve to come here like an ordinary guest?"

The outlaw was beginning to smile, the way he had after he had shot the man on the train. "Believe me, brother, I ain't no ordinary guest. I'm a special guest. I'm Lobo. Everybody knows me."

"Does the sheriff know you?"

"Of course! Him and me are pals." What kind of town was this, where train robbers and murderers boasted of their friendship with peace officers? Joe saw that only the most powerful force could cope with such a situation—a Power from on High.

He glanced upward to beseech that Power. And then another power, much more mundane, but much closer, interfered. A huge driving fist landed in the pit of his stomach. He fell backward into his room, and the power that had put him there disappeared. He writhed

on the floor, breathless.

Amy came running in.

"Wa—wa—wa—" he gasped.

She must have thought he was asking for water, as his waving arms extended toward the big water pitcher on the wash stand. She seized the pitcher, bent over him solicitously, and threw the contents into his face.

He was just beginning to get a little air into his paralyzed lungs. He strangled and coughed. Ezzie, the hotel clerk, appeared on the scene. He seemed to enjoy hugely the spectacle of a preacher, dressed in a long-tailed coat, writhing on the floor in a paroxysm of coughing.

"Been drinkin' too much, Parson?" he asked.

When Joe got his breath, he cried, "Did you see him? Which way did he go?"

"Who?" asked Ezzie.

"That desperado! Lobo!

Ezzie said placidly, "Sure I saw Lobo. Comin' down the steps a minute ago. Was he the one that done this to you?"

"Yes! Stop him—!"

Ezzie shook his head. "Not me. Looks like you tried to stop him, and look what you got. You're dern lucky at that, Parson. Lobo usually knocks 'em down with .45 slugs—not with his fists. . . ."

SIX days later Joe had an answer to his letter to the Bishop. Ezzie handed it to him at the hotel desk, and he tore it open with unsteady hands.

"My dear Joe! I have read your letter and also the account of the train robbery in the papers. I think you acted courageously, and see no reason whatsoever for your giving up the ministry . . ."

Joe's relief and joy was unbounded. Many times in the past six days he had seen celebrating cowboys shooting off their guns, throwing their hats in the air, and yelling "Yip-ee!" He knew, now, exactly how they felt. The happiness that was crowding his heart seemed bound to come out in some such manner, but he remembered in the nick of time his tall silk hat.

"Good news?"

He swung around at the sound of Amy's voice.

"Very good news!" And he told her about the letter.

He had confided in her all of his doubts and misgivings, and she had insisted that he had done nothing wrong.

"Didn't I tell you!" she said. "I'm so glad."

But the gladness was soon gone from her voice and the loneliness was in her eyes again. Joe asked, "You haven't heard from your mother yet?"

"Only through Colonel Charter. He says she is in New Mexico, looking over some mining property. I can't help but feel there's something wrong. Do you think so?"

Joe did think so, decidedly. But he tried to reassure her. His words sounded formal and meaningless.

As Amy went slowly up the stairs, Cannon Lewis came into the lobby. He seemed to know instinctively that Joe and Amy had been talking together, and what they had been talking about. "Parson," he said, scratching reflectively at his rusty-red sideburns, "I think I'd better let you in on something."

He motioned Joe to a pair of vacant chairs in one corner of the lobby. Joe had a feeling that he was going to hear something unpleasant.

"Something's got to be done about that girl, and I'm damned if I know what," said Lewis, scratching a match on his boot and lighting a cigar.

"Has something happened to her mother?" Joe asked, now thoroughly alarmed.

Lewis laughed shortly. "Something

happened to her a long time ago—something she doesn't want her dughter to know about."

"What do you mean?"

Lewis puffed vigorously. "Her mother is known hereabouts as 'Lady Gay.' She runs a saloon and dance hall below the tracks."

When the full implication of this hit Joe, he felt as he had the day Lobo hit him in the stomach. "But that's impossible! A girl like that—"

"Uh, huh," said Lewis, watching him closely. "A girl like that. You are a pretty good friend of hers, aren't you, Parson?"

"Of course! That is—I'm interested in her, of course."

"Hm-m-m. Of course. Well, maybe you can straighten out this mess. If you want to talk to her ma, you'll find her at a place called 'The Lady Gay'."

It took several unpleasant hours for Joe to come to the conclusion he could not escape his duty in this matter. He must go to see Lady Gay. With her, he must work out some solution to this sickening muddle.

The railroad tracks divided Dodge City into halves. In the north half there were business houses and saloons. In the south half there were business houses and saloons. On the north side, you could get drunk decently. On the south side, you could get drunk indecently. There was a vast amount of difference.

It took much more courage for Joe to enter The Lady Gay than it had to shoot a bank robber. The place was large and noisy and filled with men and girls and tobacco smoke. On the right was the bar, with a line of customers in various poses and moods and stages of inebriety. To the left appeared to be a theater, with tables and chairs. The heart of the room was a dance floor, which merged into a broad stairway at the rear of the building. On a platform by the stairs, a slender man slumped over a square piano, drumming monotonously "Sweet Belle Malone."

Joe caught the eye of one of the bartenders. "I'd like to see Lady Gay," he said.

"Upstairs," said the bartender.

AS JOE mounted the stairs, his embarrassment also mounted. On the upperlanding he passed a girl who eyed him curiously. Down a short hallway he came to an open door, and there sat —he was sure of it—Lady Gay.

She was at a small desk in a large luxuriously furnished room. She was stylishly dressed in pale blue silk, and around her gracefully curved shoulders a misty scarf glinted with spangles. In spite of the faintly shadowed wrinkles about the slumberous gray eyes and moulded lips, in spite of the cords that stretched taut under the creamy skin of her neck when she turned her head, Joe saw no incongruity in her regal posture. As a queen she would have been magnificent. As "Lady Gay" she was superb.

"Yes?" she said, with cool pleasantness.

"I—I am Reverend Leland," Joe began, floundering for words—and he was seldom at a loss for words.

"Yes, I know," she said.

"You—know who I am?"

"Of course. And you know who I am. What can I do for you?"

Joe glanced at the thick piled carpet of delft blue, at the chairs and sofa upholstered in brocaded satin of buttercup yellow, at the cream-colored wall paper, embossed with Grecian vases.

"I—I'm not sure," he said. "I wanted to talk to you about Amy."

Lady Gay stood up quickly. She crossed to the door and closed it. "Sit down," she said quietly.

Then she stood over him. "How did you find out?" She was very pale,

and her diamond-laden fingers were clenched. Before Joe could answer, she said, "Have you told Amy?"

Joe shook his head. "I wanted to talk to you first and find out what you intended to do."

"I intend," said Lady Gay firmly, "to send her back to school."

"You don't intend for her to find out —about you?"

"Heavens no! And if you tell her—"

Joe said hastily, "I'm not going to tell her."

Lady Gay fixed her bright wise eyes upon him. "Then why did you come to see me?"

"I don't know exactly. I hoped there might be some way to straighten out this thing, without her being hurt too much."

For a long time she didn't speak. Then, in a low brittle voice, "So! That's the way you feel about her."

Joe protested, "I don't know that I have any particular feelings in the matter. I just wanted to help—"

"Don't lie to me—or to yourself. You're in love with my daughter."

Joe started vehemently to deny the charge, but couldn't get in a word.

"But you're not going to marry her, you understand?" said Lady Gay. "What do you think I sent her to Vassar for? So she could marry a fifty-dollar-a-month parson in a cow town?"

"I assure you, madam—" Joe began with dignity.

"Never mind that preacher talk. I'm not a member of your congregation, and don't expect to be. And I didn't send for you. But now that you're here, let me tell you a couple of things: Let my daughter alone, and keep your mouth shut!"

Joe stood up, bowed stiffly. "I'm sorry I troubled you, madam. Good day. He turned toward the door.

"What are you going to do now?" demanded Lady Gay.

"There's nothing for me to do, I suppose."

"You're not going to tell Amy anything?"

Joe looked at her pityingly. He shook his head slowly. "Not for the world would I have her know that you are her mother."

Bright spots burned on Lady Gay's cheeks. "You Holy snob!" she muttered, savagely. "When I see people like you, I'm proud of myself!"

She looked anything but proud, at the moment. She looked crushed and ashamed and full of anxiety.

"Tell her if you dare!" she cried. "Tell my daughter who I am. Let her make her choice between us. I'm not afraid which one she would choose!"

But she was very much afraid, and Joe tried to comfort her. "I have no intention of betraying your secret, or of marrying your daughter. I am a minister. I thought I might help you—"

"How can you help me? What can you do?" she flung at him scornfully.

"I can pray for you."

SHE laughed, a hard, high, silvery laugh. "Pray for me! Ha! That's sweet! And what good do you think that would do?"

"God can do anything. If you would let Him come into your life—if you would renounce this kind of life—"

"What do you know about this kind of life? You're a dumb kid that don't know anything about life! All you know is what you've read in the Bible!"

Joe was speechless in the face of her savage scorn. Yet it was easy to see through. It was based on fear and deception and shame.

"Let me tell you something about my kind of life, Parson," she went on fiercely. "My husband run off with another woman. I didn't have a penny to my name. I wouldn't sponge off of

my people or my friends. I went to work, two days after my baby was born. I took in washings. I saved my pennies. I bought a rooming house. I got a chance to buy this place, and I sent my daughter off to school. I made a lady out of her. That's been my life, damn you! I'm not ashamed of it—" Her voice broke.

Joe said, humbly, "You should feel proud."

"Proud?" she echoed uncertainly. "Proud?" Scorn came back into her voice. She flung open the door, waved her hand at the motley crowd on the main floor. "Proud of all that? No, Parson, I'm not proud of it. I'm not proud of myself. I'm ashamed."

After a moment of silence, she turned again to him. "And I'm going to quit!" she announced, her china-doll eyes hard and bright. "I've got enough money to put Amy through school. I'll go back East. I'll meet her there. She'll need never to know—"

She put out her hand. "Parson," she said, "you've helped me, somehow —I don't know just how. I knew this was coming. I knew I would have to do it, sometime. But you've helped me make the decision. I'm sorry I said what I did about you."

Joe grinned. "You were probably right about me. And you've helped me, too. You've helped me to get closer to —realities."

They parted friends, this young preacher and this woman ironically known as "Lady Gay."

Joe walked thoughtfully down the winding stairs and across the crowded floor, hardly oblivious to his surroundings. He was still under the influence of a vivid and commanding personality.

"We'll, I'll be damned! If it ain't the Parson!"

A rough familiar voice arose above the tinkling piano and the hum of talk. Joe looked around to see Lobo leaning against the bar, leering at him.

"Been upstairs too!" guffawed the outlaw! "Well, well! What a hell of a Parson you turned out to be!"

And that was just what he became, in that blinding instant— a hell of a Parson! The Devil took hold of him, surely. The Devil propelled him toward the leering outlaw. The Devil doubled up his fists, and sent one of them crashing into Lobo's jaw—all so suddenly that nobody seemed to know what happened. Joe didn't. And certainly Lobo didn't.

The outlaw went sprawling backward and hit the floor alongside the brass bar rail. His head struck a spittoon. He lay staring up at Joe with dazed eyes, his hairy neck twisted, his round face expressionless.

A hush went out over that end of the room, but did not reach the piano or the louder talking patrons up front. Joe began to realize what he had done. He, a minister of the Gospel, had started a brawl in a public saloon!

He closed his eyes. "Oh, Lord!" he muttered, "Forgive me!"

He ended the prayer very quickly and opened his eyes, remembering what had happened to him the last time. But he was still filled with remorse and piety.

Stepping to the side of the befuddled man on the floor, Joe knelt beside him. "And Lord," he said, lifting his voice in a fervent outburst of prayer, "forgive this man! He knoweth not what he doeth. Manifest Thy power, oh Lord! Save his soul now!"

The hush crept over the entire saloon. Motionless faces, gaping mouths, staring eyes, circled Joe and his victim.

Lobo struggled to a sitting position, passed one beefy hand across his eyes, then stared warily at Joe. "Good God!" he muttered.

Joe was filled with the exalted Power he had prayed for. "God can save your

soul!" he said. "Right here and now! If you will only ask Him."

Lobo got up on his knees, and it looked to Joe that Lobo was in a praying position.

But Lobo whipped out his gun.

"Now, *you* pray, goddam you!" snarled the outlaw. "You're on your way to heaven, right now!"

FACING death, Joe felt absolutely no fear. On his way to Heaven! He couldn't be frightened by words like that.

He said, calmly and fervently, "May the Lord have mercy on your soul!"

The round black muzzle of the gun wavered. "Damn you!" muttered Lobo hoarsely. "I can't kill you. You ain't human!"

"Help him, Lord!" prayed Joe. "Thou canst save a soul, even as black as this."

"Shut up!" shouted Lobo, and lifted his gun to strike swiftly downward at Joe's head.

Instinctively, Joe ducked aside. Then, almost as instinctively—by this time it was getting to be a habit—he lashed out with his fist. All the power that filled Joe seemed to be behind that blow. He aimed at the fringe of hair which crept up to Lobo's chin. His aim was good.

Being on his knees, Lobo didn't have so far to fall this time, but he seemed to fall harder than before. The gun dropped to the floor.

Joe was beginning to doubt the effectiveness of prayer in a case of this kind. He waited silently till Lobo was able to sit up again. Lobo began feeling around for his gun, but someone had booted it out of his reach.

"I'll get you!" he panted. "I'll get you!"

There was a wild, bewildered look on his face. "If you're human, I'll get you—and you're human, or you wouldn't be here!"

Joe flushed.

Lobo's eyes grew crafty. "I know how I'll get you. Maybe you ain't afraid to die. But I know something you're afraid of! I know how I'll get you—!"

He made no explanation. He got to his feet and pushed through the crowd toward the rear of the saloon and passed from sight.

Embarrassment overwhelmed Joe as he realized everybody in the place was staring at him. "Excuse me," he mumbled, making his escape.

It wasn't long before Joe found out what kind of vengeance Lobo had in mind. Joe had been able to face Lobo's sixgun calmly and fearlessly. But he couldn't face this thing in any such a manner. Before it, he stood aghast.

Colonel Charter was the first to confront him with it. Joe had preached his first sermon at Colonel Charter's house, standing in the doorway, dividing his attention with the women gathered in the parlor and the scattering of men who sat in wagons and on the steps outside.

The fight at the Lady Gay was late Saturday afternoon. On Sunday morning, Joe was met at the front door of the Charter house by the Colonel.

"Young man," said the Colonel, "is it true that you were engaged in a brawl at The Lady Gay last night?"

"Why—yes, it is," said Joe. "I was insulted and I—guess I lost my head."

"You certainly did! What were you doing at The Lady Gay?"

Joe didn't feel that this was any of the Colonel's business, but he said. "I went there to see Lady Gay. I suppose you know why?"

"No, I don't know why," scowled the Colonel.

"Amy tells me you have been in touch with her mother. Is that so?"

The Colonel's scowl deepened. He

cleared his throat noisily. "So that's it! I might have known you would get your nose in this. What are you going to do about it?"

"There seems to be nothing I can do."

"Too bad you didn't see that in the first place. You've already done too much, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you realize, young man, that you have disgraced yourself—that you can never expect to fill a pulpit here, or anywhere else for that matter?"

"But—why?"

"Don't you know that everybody in town is talking about the fight you had in that den of sin? Don't you know everybody is asking what you were doing there?"

A smothered sensation closed about Joe's heart. Yes, he did know. And he knew that he couldn't tell them. He would never reveal Lady Gay's secret. He would never hurt Amy that much.

"And don't you know they are answering their own questions?" the Colonel went on sternly. "Everybody is laughing at you—everybody but your own congregation. They are astounded. Everybody else is laughing at the church—at me, at all of us! I demand your immediate resignation!"

Back at the hotel, Joe slipped past Amy's door and locked himself in his room. This then was the vengeance Lobo had foreseen. It was a thousand times worse than death.

WHEN he learned that he was to be tried for conduct unbecoming a minister, he was not greatly surprised. This was largely the doings of Colonel Charter and Elder Franklin. Notified of the circumstances of Joe's "disgrace" by the Colonel, Elder Franklin came to Dodge and made a personal investigation, then reported his findings to Bishop Sturm.

The Bishop wrote to Joe asking for an explanation. Embittered by this lack of confidence in him, Joe refused to make any explanations. The order convening the board of ministers followed.

They met at Colonel Charter's house —Bishop Sturm, Elder Franklin, and three other ministers of the conference. No outsiders were allowed.

A drizzling rain was falling, and the stuffy little parlor was damp and dolorous, in spite of the flamboyant roses in the wall paper design, the gay Aubusson carpet, and the red plush mahogany furniture.

The Biship sat in a big rocking chair, before a small table, and around him were grouped the ministers. Joe sat in one corner of the room, near a whatnot laden with the family Bible, a china kitten and pug dog, three crumbling sea shells, and a glass lamp. He stared grimly at the china clock on the mantel, flanked by blood-red Bohemian vases.

Colonel Charter was across the room, and Mrs. Charter was lurking in the dining room.

The Bishop arose. "Let us pray."

There was the noise of shifting bodies. Joe turned his rebellious stare at the lowered head of Reverend Spott, pointed directly at him, glistening moon-like in the dim light which came from the window. The Elder was on his knees, his long pointed face turned upward, looking absurdly like a dog preparing to howl at the new startling moon of the other man's head. Reverend Beauchamp looked as though he had slumped into slumber. The Colonel was leaning forward, one hand on his hip, the other cupped over his eyes, the little finger pointing stiffly in the general direction of heaven.

". . . help us do Thy will . . . set our feet upon the right path and let us not err in the performance of our

duty . . ."

The softly rolling voice ceased. An oblique colonnade of sunlight jutted out from the south window, and a pattering of rain ran lightly along the roof.

"Reverend Leland," said the Bishop, "you are charged with visiting a house of ill fame, of demonstrating a lack of self-control and a general unfitness for the ministry. Specifically, you are charged with engaging in a brawl in a place known as The Lady Gay. Have you any answer to make to these charges?"

Joe arose. "Only this. I went to see the Lady Gay on a personal matter which has nothing to do with the church—"

He paused. This didn't sound the way he wanted it to. "What I mean to say is that I went there in my capacity as a minister, but that the errand is one that cannot be publicly discussed."

"Did you," asked the Bishop, "engage in a fight while you were there?"

Joe gulped. "Y-yes, I did."

"Have you any explanation to offer for that?"

Joe shook his head miserably. "None whatever. I confess that I lost control of myself, for the moment."

The Bishop leaned forward. "Anything you say, Reverend Leland, you may rest assured will be held strictly confidential. Will you not explain your —unbecoming act in going to a place like that?"

"No!" shouted Joe. "I will not! I'm guilty of what you charge me with. What's the use of all this? You have my ordination papers. What more do you want?"

They stared at him in silence. He turned blindly, and started out of the door.

His exit was blocked. Blocked by a vision—a mockery of his own imagination. It couldn't be—Lady Gay!

"Just a minute, Joe," she said. "I heard what you told them, and I know why—to protect me and my daughter. I'm going to straighten all this out."

She walked into the room.

"Gentlemen," she said, "I am known in Dodge City as 'Lady Gay'—"

And now Joe saw another vision—a vision of loveliness, but one that was contorted immediately into one of horror, in Joe's mind.

Amy was coming through the white picket gate.

"My real name," said Lady Gay, "is Mary Stevens. I have a daughter, Amy. She does not know that I am 'Lady Gay'—"

Joe tried to stop her. He tried to stop Amy. But it was too late. Amy was on the porch. She was hearing every word her mother said.

"Joe came to see me," said Lady Gay. "He came to help me, and he has helped me a great deal—"

"Mother!"

LADY GAY swung about. Her china-doll face whitened. She lost her defiant, regal pose. She withered, in the space of a second, into an old woman.

"Amy!" she whispered.

For an instant nobody spoke. It seemed like an eternity to Joe.

Amy approached her mother timidly. "I saw you—I followed you—I heard what you said. But—why have you been avoiding me?"

Lady Gay said weakly, "You heard?"

"Yes."

"You know that I am—Lady Gay?"

"That's what I heard you say."

"Do you know what that means?"

"Of course. I've heard several people mention you. They say you run the biggest saloon and dance hall in town. Quite a distinction, I'd say, in a town where there are so many. Why didn't you want me to know?"

Lady Gay swayed a little. "You mean—you're not—ashamed of me?"

"Ashamed of you!" Amy exclaimed. "Why should I be? Why, I'm proud of you!"

Crying softly, Lady Gay took her daughter in her arms. Joe got a glimpse of Amy's face. It was not the face of a girl who was proud of anything, but the face of a girl who loved her mother more than her own pride.

"Well, gentlemen," said the Bishop, "I think that ends our little session. Except for one very important point: The begging of Reverend Leland's forgiveness, each and every one of us."

A great exaltation filled him. He had been exonerated. His work could go on. He could, and would bring religion to the West.

But, at the moment, he was anxious to get away, to talk to Amy and Lady Gay. And soon he was hastening back toward the hotel.

They were not in sight. He went up the stairs, knocked on Amy's door. There was no response.

Somewhat disconsolately, he entered his own room and stood looking out over the plaza. He heard footsteps coming down the hallway, quick light steps. He turned eagerly.

But the figure that appeared out of the shadowy hallway was most decidedly not that of Amy.

"I heard how the trial come out," said Lobo, "and I thought I'd come around and congratulate you."

The outlaw stepped into the room and softly closed the door. "I thought I had somethin' cocked that would knock you down flatter than a sixgun," he said. "Looks like it back-fired."

"I don't quite see how this affects you—" Joe began.

"Oh, you don't? Do you see that you've been gettin' in my way ever since I first run across you? That cost me a nice little stake, first time. Then you got the drop on me, the next time I saw you, but not this time. See?"

He had his gun out.

"The third time," he recounted, "you made a fool out of me. And nobody is goin' to make a fool out of me, and live! See?"

Joe saw, all right. He saw the gun, and he saw the murderous hatred of the man. He saw that only one power could be pitted successfully against him.

HE SAID, "I see that my prayers for you have been in vain. But perhaps I can convince you yet. Let me get my Bible."

He stepped firmly to the old bureau and slid open the top drawer.

"Bible eh?" scoffed Lobo. "Goin' to pray for me again, are you? Better start prayin' for yourself. Get down on your knees and pray, while I blow your brains out—"

He yelped an oath as Joe lifted his gun from the bureau drawer. The thunder of both guns filled the room. Joe was slapped back against the bureau. Lobo's knees buckled and he sank down against the door.

Joe stood there and watched him, ready to shoot again if it was necessary. But it wasn't. Lobo was on his knees, as if he were praying, but Joe made no mistake this time of thinking that he was. Instead, he was dying.

He slumped forward and lay still.

Joe had killed another man. He waited for remorse to come as it had before, but only a grim sort of pity swept over him for this man.

He put his hand to his side, where Lobo's bullet had nicked him. It was queer, he thought, how little he cared.

He looked at the gun in his hand. He held to it firmly. His "Bible." It seemed to be the Bible of Dodge City. And perhaps—perhaps, until the real Bible came to stay, this one would have to do . . .

Wanted: Four Kill-Crazy Gunslammers!

By D. B. NEWTON

Author of "Be Fast Battle—Cub, or Hire Boothill!", etc.

Wanted: Four Kill-hungry hardcases to draw iron with the man who Colt-smashed the Kid from No Man's Creek!

The double snouts swung across the circle of men!

THEY came up the line of the gold camps—up past First Diggin's, and Bonanza, and Bent's Color, and the other tawdry, brawling places which strung like dubious pearls the length of No Man's Creek. They came through the sweating hordes of denim-clad men who toiled like ants on the yellow-mud banks, at rocker and sluice and mining pan. They came thus to Gold Bank in the last red light of sunset. And they were not much to look at.

Just a man and a kid, drifters, like a hundred others who crowded the boggy streets and cheap tents and buildings of the place that night. But they'd left a dead man back down the line, at Bent's Color; and they brought death with them.

They drifted through the camp, leisurely, but with something purposeful in the look of them. The man was

big, unshaven, with keen gray eyes under heavy brows. Those eyes of his were never still; they sent glances licking like a snake's tongue, feeling at the faces and the sights around him. Often, as they slogged through the yellow mud, he would stop and speak softly to the kid he had with him—a thin-bodied lad in the first of his teens, wide-eyed and a little pale. But the kid would look at the man he indicated, and always he shook his head.

Finally, however, when the stranger pointed out Bart Rucker to him, the boy looked at the red features of the bully, with the high-bridged nose and sunken cheeks; and this time he gave a startled nod. And Bart Rucker died.

It happened so quickly that few of those in the saloon knew what was going on until it was all over. They heard the thunder of the shots, and looked up quickly from drinks and poker hands; and those nearest were in time to see Rucker leaning groggily against the rough pine-board bar, one hand gripping the edge of it for support, the other tearing at the cloth of his hickory shirt. His smoking gun lay at his feet; surprised and the shocked knowledge of death were stamped across his face. Then he fell suddenly, his body twisting as he went down so that he landed on his back and lay there staring blankly up at the clouds of smoke that swirled high under the canvas roof of the saloon.

USUALLY, the only death that much concerned a man of Gold Bank was his own, and maybe that of his enemy. So these men who had lost no love on Rucker while he lived, looked with only a curious interest to learn who had done for him. They saw one that none of them knew; they saw the gun in his hand dribbling smoke, and the kid who stood at his elbow, eyes wide in a pale, pinched face. While you could count three slowly, no one moved or spoke.

Then, as the silence began to shatter again under the shuffle of boots and rising of voices, a sudden commotion began near the edge of the crowd and newcomers were pushing in. The men made way for them. There were Jed Bayliss, and Crow Harney, and one or two of Rucker's other friends. They all looked somehow alike, in the lean, wolfish eagerness with which they circled in. The stranger snapped his gun into line, his snakelike glance shooting swiftly over their faces and sensing danger.

Crow Harney stopped abruptly, a mean glint in his eyes and fury building inside him as he caught sight of Rucker dead, and the stranger standing over his body. His stocky frame settled a little into a gunman's stance, and the right hand poised near the butt of the revolver in his waistband. Sharp eyes bit into the face of the stranger.

"Anybody want to carry this thing further?" the latter demanded. He looked past Harney at Bayliss and the others. "I'm ready any time—"

Jed Bayliss shoved into line with Harney, black bearded face hard. But the guns that might have flamed into life at another word were stopped unexpectedly.

For Big Mike, the Irishman behind the bar, kept a wicked looking shotgun always handy, double loads of scrap iron in its sawed off barrels. He came into view with it ready in his big, red-furred hands. The double snouts swung across the circle of men.

"All right, gents," he cut in, with elaborate carelessness. "Bart Rucker got his fair and square. I saw the stranger here come up and start talking to him; and then all at once Bart heads for his gun and this gent beat him!"

The saloon man flourished his shot-

gun meaningfully. "There's one dead man bleedin' on the floor now, and that's enough! If anybody wants to buck the man who could outshoot Bart Rucker, they're welcome—but I'll be damned if they're gonna do it in my place!"

Perhaps it was the menace of that shotgun that stopped the men who wanted blood. But on the other hand, it might have been the knowledge that this stranger had done the impossible, that he'd dropped Bart Rucker fairly. In any event, Rucker's friends began to back down. They wavered a moment, darting quick glances among themselves.

And seeing this, the stranger slid the gun back in its holster. There was something almost of disappointment in his frown as he studied the faces of Bayliss, and Harney, and the two others who had come in with them. He looked at the kid, as though in question; but this time the boy didn't nod his sun-bleached head. He had nodded twice before—once at Bent's Color, and again just a moment ago — and each time a man had died. Now he merely shrugged his thin shoulders, and the frown cut deeper into the space between the stranger's eyes.

HE looked back at the quartet of kill-hungry men—the friends of Bart Rucker. Then, as a stirring in the ranks hinted that the crowd was on the verge of breaking up, he said suddenly: "If this is where it lays, I'm agreeable. Sure, I killed Bart Rucker —if that was his name; I wouldn't know. I killed him because I had to—because he was a murdering, crawling snake. But now that he's dead, it's only decent he should have an honest buryin'." The stranger paused; his next words lashed out heavily upon the astonished room:

"So I'm giving it to him myself—the best funeral a man can have here in Gold Bank. It'll be tomorrow morning, and I'm asking you all to be there —especially Bart Rucker's friends!"

With one last stare for Crow Harney and Jed Bayliss, he boldly turned his back and strode out of the saloon, the kid at his heels. Behind him, the confused hum of startled voices broke, and grew. Under the weight of curious eyes, the friends of Bart Rucker also shrugged through the crowd and moved as a knot, into the darkness and the turbulent night of Gold Bank.

In a very few minutes, the whole camp had heard about the killing at Mike's. They knew about the sharp-eyed stranger and the kid that tailed him, and they knew how Rucker, the bully, had been bested and how his cronies had taken water. That was good news in itself. Rucker and Bayliss and Harney had been running Gold Bank too openly. There had been too many sluggings, too many muckers robbed of their pokes.

But it was the news of the funeral that astonished them most. Gold Bank planted its dead on a windy hill on the heights back of the squalid huddle of shacks and tents; there was no time for any formalities in such cases. But now everyone learned that Bart Rucker was to be laid away next morning in style—and by the man who had killed him. It was the novelty of this, and the possibility for drama that it held, that kept Gold Bank alive with a fever of interest as the night drew on.

Rumor followed the stranger wherever he went, the boy always at his side. The whole camp knew about it when he went to shake Doc Bone out of a drunken sleep, and sent him over to get Rucker's body from the saloon and fetch it to his office. It was said that Bayliss and Harney and that bunch were lying low, glowering at any who spoke to them, but not ready yet to

carry further what had been started at Big Mike's.

Then word spread that the stranger and his companion had disappeared from the camp entirely.

But sometime near midnight a man drifted up the line who stammered his amazement when he heard what was going on. Yes, it must be the same gent —the one with the kid. His name was supposed to be Collins. He'd killed a man two days ago, at Bent's Color. And offered to pay for the funeral!

Its curiosity whetted and eager, Gold Bank waited for dawn.

AND in the light of a dying fire, in the hills back of the camp, the man named Collins cleaned and oiled his gun. His face was grim in the flame-wash, his whole mind and body concentrated on the work of his hands. The kid lay on a blanket nearby, young face turned to the fire and peaceful in sleep. They, too, were waiting for tomorrow.

As he shoved in the last cartridge and clicked home the loading gate, the man heard a sound that brought his head up, listening. There were the high stars overhead, the breeze in juniper branches. He got up suddenly, kicked out the fire, and melted into the darkness of the brush.

He crept soundlessly over the black ground, gun in one hand. Paused a moment, listening again. The man downslope from him moved, the bulk of him stirring against the other night shadows.

Some noise Collins made gave him away at the same moment. Cherry flame blasted the night as the one downslope lanced a shot at him. Collins brought his own gun into line and hit the trigger, aiming at the flash of the revolver.

The night split open with the gunfire. Collins heard a yelp of surprise, but knew that his bullet hadn't done any damage because the answering fire continued. And then a hot streak across his arm knocked him off balance. He dropped the revolver as he fell; it took several minutes of searching before his fingers touched the hot metal of it and he grasped it up. And by that time, the fading sounds of running feet told him his assailant was gone.

He picked himself up, nursing the sore arm, and stared at the night, listening. He could hear the kid, too, roused by the shooting and calling to him from the campsite.

Collins said, under his breath, "What I'd have given for one look at his face! Just one!" Then he shrugged. "It'll have to work out the other way, then. But for the kid's sake, I hope to God nothin' goes wrong!"

He went back slowly, calling out to tell the boy he was unhurt.

With dawn, and the hour for the funeral, Collins still hadn't showed up at Gold Bank; but Doc Bone had his pay and his orders, and he began on time without him. There were to be no pall bearers. The Doc merely got out a brokendown wagon and backed it up to the door of his shack; and then, with a little help, carried out the fresh pine box coffin that contained all there was left of Bart Rucker, and set it in the body of the wagon.

Then, with the Doc perched soddenly on the driver's seat, Rucker started to his final rest. It was the strangest funeral procession a man ever had—over the yellow flats of No Man's Creek, and up to the crest of the graveyard hill. A curious crowd followed the corpse in the wagon — heavy-booted miners who made crude jokes to cover the excitement they felt. Few rockers were worked along the Gold Bank that morning. The curiosity of these men fed on one thing only—Bart Rucker's

funeral.

And they all kept their eyes on Jed Bayliss, and Crow Harney; the pair who had run the camp, along with Rucker. They and their two gunslingers were in the crowd, now, that straggled slowly up to Boot Hill. But they kept to themselves. Dark of face, seemingly ready for anything.

But where was Collins?

NO one could say. The funeral procession wound slowly on under a dark, storm-swept sky, led by the wagon and team. Doc Bone, who had been fortifying himself from a bottle, hauled in at the top of the slope; and the watchful crowd milled around his wagon.

"Gimme a hand," the medico ordered. With some reluctant help, he got the pine box down out of the back; and then demanded, "Where at's the grave?"

Then someone saw, and pointed.

Yes, there it was, a spade and a pile of dirt beside it. A hole waiting to swallow the remains of the man in the pine box. A headboard, with the name neatly painted on it: Bart Rucker. But that wasn't what tensed the bodies of the men of Gold Bank!

There was another new grave, next to Rucker's! In it the crowd saw a second pine box coffin, yawning and empty. And another headboard stuck in place, waiting blankly for the name that was to go there. An uncanny expectancy pressed down over the whole burial lot, under the low roof of angry, tumbling clouds.

The crowd saw Collins, too. He was sitting on the grass a short distance away; the kid was with him, still big-eyed and pale, still silent. As the stares of the crowd found him, the stranger got to his feet and came forward, one hand riding close to his holstered six-shooter. They noticed he had a bandage tied around one arm, high up.

"Morning," he said pleasantly. "I'm glad you all honor the dead enough to come to the plantin'."

No one said anything. He looked over at Bayliss and Crow Harney, who were standing aloof from the others, and with their two followers nearby. There was suspicion and dark thunder in their faces as they glared back at him, and at that open grave with its blank headboard and empty box.

Now Bart Rucker had been lowered into his final resting place. The lifeless face, upturned to the leaden sky, seemed pleading mutely for someone to come and lie beside him in the other grave, to share with him the utter loneliness of death.

Collins seemed blind to the stirring of the men. He said, pleasantly, "There's no preacher and no undertakers in this camp. But even Rucker deserves to have something said over him, don't you think? Even if it's just to keep him from going to the wrong place and getting turned loose on the angels." Without expecting an answer, he added: "So as I'm giving him this funeral, I guess you all can wait while I say a few words for him."

And he did, for five long, tense minutes. It was no sermon, no prayer he reeled off. He talked about the different kinds of men in the world—those who did good, and others who inflicted so much harm on their fellows that it was up to someone to get rid of them just as you got rid of rattlers and other varmints. He didn't leave much doubt as to what he was getting at; but when they thought he was about half through he suddenly stopped and thought a minute, and then said, "I guess that's enough talkin'."

THE stranger paused, stood for a long moment running his eye lazily but intently over the faces of the men who fronted him. There was dead

silence—the silence of held breath, and of the many dead, and of an uncovered grave and another that waited mutely to be filled. Only the wind whispered rushing overhead, whipping at their garments, running in waves through the grass.

Collins said then: "Let's all sing, gents. A hymn."

A hymn! That was going too far! But Collins was looking past the crowd, over their massed heads and away down the hill to the huddled shacks and tents of the camp, and the yellow mud banks, and the dirty flow of No Man Creek under the dark heavens. With his eye on that filthy stream, he added: "We'll make it 'Shall We Gather By the River.' And everybody better join in—even if you don't know all the words. It'll be good for your souls!"

He motioned to Doc Bone. "You start 'em off, Doc," he ordered.

The old medico, more than half drunk, looked at Collins blearily. He started to mutter something, and changed his mind. Then, with a shrug, he began the singing in an unsteady voice. One or two others joined him.

But the rest stood sullen and silent, eyeing the stranger. And Collins' face grew dark with anger, as the strange requiem faltered and staggered from uncertain tongues.

Then Crow Harney made a mistake. He laughed.

It was a harsh, derisive laugh that cut straight through the fabric of the music and sheered it off. The Doc stopped with mouth open, bloodshot eyes blinking. The other voices dropped silent.

But the stranger, Collins, had whirled upon the mocker, and the six-gun had leaped into his hand with a suddenness so blinding it slapped Harney's laughter into silence against his lips. The man began, too late, a move for his own holstered weapon, and caught himself. He gaped stupidly into the black muzzle aimed directly at him.

"Ain't you got any respect for the mourners at a funeral?" Collins shot at him. "Your pal Rucker's funeral, at that! I think you owe the rest of us an apology."

Harney merely glared at him, bulky shoulders hunched a little.

Then stranger said: "Mebbe you ought to sing us a solo. Do you suppose?"

Crow Harney gritted, "You go to hell, wise guy!"

The gun tightened in Collins' fingers. "You heard me," he countered. "When I count five you better be singing—good and loud!"

His lips began moving; gray eyes as firm as the weapon in his tightening grasp. Crow Harney lost some of his bravado as he saw the look in Collins' eyes. His assurance washed off him by degrees. He swallowed.

Collins said "five" very deliberately; very deliberately his weapon came up dead center, looming at Harney like the mouth of a tunnel. And all at once, Crow Harney was singing!

But the sounds that came out of his bearded mouth! Tuneless, wavering—something very like the hoarse cawing of the bird they'd nicknamed him for.

AND then those who were watching Collins saw his eye narrow; saw him glance in question toward the kid who stood silently nearby.

And they saw the kid nod slowly.

"That's enough!" the stranger snapped.

The gun was still waiting in Collins' hand. "That's all I wanted," he said. "To hear you sing like that, and to let the kid hear you. You did it one night three months ago, when you and Bart Rucker and Fat Johnson killed the boy's dad in a cabin down on Marlowe Creek, and

lifted the gold he'd dug out of the earth. You remember that night? You remember Joe Binson? Well, this kid is Joe's son. You didn't know it, but he was hiding in the loft and saw you kill his dad—my partner. He saw the faces of Rucker and Fat Johnson. He pointed Johnson out to me day before yesterday in Bent's Color, and Rucker here, yesterday. It took us three months to catch up with them!"

Collins said then, "But Pete here didn't see the face of the third man. He only heard him try to sing—after he'd got himself pie-eyed on a jug of Joe Vinson's whiskey. So we've been looking for a friend of Bart Rucker's who was a monotone—a gent who was tone deaf and couldn't carry a tune in a box. I knew he must be you, or Bayliss, or one of your pals, but I didn't know which. And I had to know."

Deliberately, Collins shoved his gun deep into its holster, and stood half-crouched, ready to call it forth again. His words cracked like a whip. "You've given yourself away, now. You've showed me who's supposed to go in this extra grave. Last night you tried to gun me down, out there in the dark, but you didn't make it; now I'm givin' you another chance. *Pull your iron—murderer!*"

And, with a screech of rage, Crow Harney obeyed. His weapon blurred up from leather, streaking lead as it came. But Collins had let him have a better than even chance, and still beaten him. His weapon was out sooner — a split second sooner that counted for all the difference. It bucked in his fist, and Crow Harney rocked at the impact of the bullet that drilled deep into his body. He staggered a moment, fighting it. Then suddenly bent in the middle and toppled over, face forward—into the grave that had been dug to receive him!

Jed Bayliss had drawn a moment later than his backshooting partner. Lead from his six-gun lanced at Collins, and caught him in the leg. The man who had killed Harney stumbled, went to one knee; but his gun was still in his hand, and he had it dragged around now and lined on Bayliss. Even as he hit the ground he triggered, and Bayliss fell.

"Take it easy!" a voice snapped. The other two renegades who had been sliding for their own weapons froze at that voice, halted with fingers barely touching shiny holster mouths. On the short grass, Big Mike stood a little distance away, double-barreled shotgun cradled wickedly in his arms. "Your pals are dead," the Irishman told them shortly. "And I think this camp has had enough of you two. We'll give you fifteen minutes to hit the trail out!"

SUDDENLY both of them had turned and were running, bolting for freedom and safety from the menace of that deadly double bore and the death in Collins' six-gun. Men who had feared them yesterday stood and laughed at them now in their flight. A cloud of oppression seemed to have lifted suddenly from the men.

And the one who had done this was sitting on the grass, one hand still holding his gun, the other on the shoulder of the kid, Pete Vinson. He waved away Doc Bone, who wanted to tend to his wounded knee. "Later!" he grunted. "Plenty of time for that." To the kid he said, "Well, it's finished. Maybe, now, down there in the camp we'll find the gold the murdering skunks took off your dad. Or—better yet—we can take us more, out of the creek. Cleaner gold."

Solemnly, the boy nodded. There was the first rattle of clods on pine boxes as someone went to work with the spade, and the double graves began slowly to fill.

Wire, Water, and Winchesters

By

MORSE CHANDLER

Author of "When a Colt-Loose Kid Hits Leather," etc.

The stranger didn't savvy that Jeff Dairen was laid up with a bullet wound and flat broke—the stranger just hankered to throw some hot lead!

Kent saw them, and a gun leaped into his hand, covering Jack Lash

ANGRY lights capered in Flame Dairen's blue eyes as she jerked her hand from the possessive clasp of Jack Lash's fingers.

Jack Lash laughed softly, but there wasn't any mirth in his inky eyes. Lash was big, dark-faced and arrogant, fancily dressed in ornamented cream sombrero and polished boots. He was a power in the Blue Moon Basin, and used to getting what he wanted—everything but Flame Dairen. Now his admiring gaze roved over her slim, rounded body, from scuffed boots upward over clean blue denims and shirt to dark red hair that framed a flushed, piquant face.

"Am I so bad-looking as that?" Lash asked softly.

"Looks have nothing to do with it," said Flame. "If I loved a man I'd marry him, no matter what he looked like."

"Then why not marry me? I've got money; I own a big slice of this country, and I'll soon own more."

Flame's red lips curled scornfully. She said, "Money such as yours is tainted with lies and trickery and violence. You got it by trading on the misfortunes of other men, by pushing them into corners and squeezing them."

"A corner," said Jack Lash, "like your father's in, right now."

Flame Dairen was silent a moment, her blue eyes clouded. Her father, Jeff Dairen, *was* in a corner, and there didn't seem any way out. Jack Lash held a mortgage against their 3 Star outfit, due next month. And Jeff Dairen, besides being laid up with a bullet wound, was broke. There wasn't a chance to pay off the mortgage, for thieves had almost stripped the 3 Star of cattle.

There was a way out—the old way. Jack Lash wanted Flame Dairen, wanted her as he'd never wanted anything else; it showed always in his ruthless black eyes as they watched her. Flame despised the big, fancy-dressing rancher, because she knew that he was cruel and dishonest and selfish, and because she guessed that he was behind all their troubles.

But, for Jeff, she'd kept Jack Lash from seeing her distaste. She'd even encouraged him, a little, in his love-making, for it was their only chance—Jeff's only chance. They'd ridden farther than usual today, and a few minutes before they'd dismounted in a shady little glade that was hemmed by cedars. And now Flame was wishing she was away, for the light in Lash's eyes sent little shivers along her spine.

"A beautiful home," Jack Lash was saying softly. "Money to buy pretty clothes, anything you wanted."

"Except love," Flame said.

"You're in love, right now—all you need is something to wake you up!"

STARTLED by something in his voice, Flame turned quickly, just as Lash's big arms closed about her slim, soft body. Lash was smiling, but his dark eyes were hard and fiery as his seeking lips lowered swiftly.

Flame tried to twist her lithe body away, not frightened, but furiously angry.

"You—you fool!" she said fiercely. "Let me loose!"

"You don't want loose—you know you don't," Lash said.

Slowly, ruthlessly, he forced her dark head back. His lips bruised roughly down against her own—and, like an icicle, quick alarm pierced the anger that roared through her heart.

Then, suddenly, strong hands tore her from Jack Lash's arms and sent her reeling. She whirled, and saw a bronzed fist blast hard against Lash's chin and smash him to the ground. The owner of the fist was tall and lean and yellow-haired. Anger smouldered in his gold-flecked eyes as he looked down at Jack Lash.

Lash swayed to his feet, black rage boiling in his eyes and making his voice harsh. "That was a bad thing to do, mister. I own most of this basin, and I'll—"

"You don't own me," said the tall man. "Get!"

Jack Lash started to bluster. Then he saw something in the tall man's golden eyes that made him hush; made him whirl, mount his big dun and spur savagely through the cedars and away.

The stranger watched him go, then turned to Flame. He was smiling, hat in hand, and then Flame saw that he was handsome—not arrogantly and blatantly handsome like Jack Lash, but—just handsome. The grimness was gone from his gold-flecked eyes and in its place was something that sent a tingle along Flame's spine that was different from the one Jack Lash had caused. A gaunt buckskin stood patiently at the edge of the cedars, where the stranger had dismounted unnoticed a moment before.

Flame said, acutely conscious of her man's garb, "Thanks, cowboy. But you'll have to watch out for Jack Lash."

"A bad hombre, is he?"

"He's bad, all right." Curiosity

overrode thoughts of Lash. "Do you ride for some outfit in the basin?"

He shook his head slowly, his tawny-eyed gaze flicking her slender body from tiny spurred boots to coppery hair. But there was nothing offensive in that appraisal; and Flame knew it would take more than denims and shirt to hide her lithe, vital beauty.

"You might say I'm just passing through," he said. "A stranger, but I might tarry—if I got acquainted."

"My name's Flame. Flame Dairen."

"Mine's Kent Silvers. Little girls like you, Flame, shouldn't be out riding with such big, bad wolves."

Her quick smile flashed. "Are you a big, bad wolf?"

"I didn't mean me."

The cedars rustled and a rider came into the glade. He sat looking at them—a runty, ugly little old man with dour features and drooping longhorn mustaches. He spoke to Kent Silvers.

"Hell'n hosshide, younker, you aim to tarry here all day?"

"I couldn't think of a better place," said Kent Silvers, looking at Flame Dairen. "Lady, that's Bullhide Biddle, my partner, and the meanest, orneriest old coon in the bottoms."

OLD Bullhide grunted, gazing with obvious distrust at Flame. Flame turned her red-lipped smile on the crusty oldster, saying, "You both have a hungry look. And, to pay Kent Silvers for rescuing me, I want you both to go to the ranch with me and have supper. Will you?"

"Nope," said Bullhide promptly. "We got some important business over yonder, and it won't wait—"

"Sure, we'll go," Kent Silvers grinned. "That business can wait, Bullhide, till we settle some more business."

Bullhide Biddle snorted. "Women! I knowed when you headed through them cedars trouble was stewin'."

"You wouldn't want me to pass up a lady in distress, would you?"

"I sure as Jericho would," Bullhide said promptly. "It's fine to help ladies—if they're old and ugly and toothless. But if they're young and got red hair and eyes like chips out of the sky—nope, better get tangled with a plague!"

Flame laughed, and her eyes met Kent Silvers, and warm blood whipped faster through her veins. Then they were on their horses and were riding across the plain toward the 3 Star, Kent Silvers and Flame side by side and Bullhide gloomily following. The sun was smearing the sky with a wild riot of colors when they reached the 3 Star. It seemed to Flame that those warm colors had crept into her heart, driving out some of the despair and fear that had been there so long.

After watering and graining their horses, they went into the big old log ranch house. Jeff Dairen, Flame's father, sat propped in a chair in the big living room. Jeff was a paunchy, gray-bearded man, his features lined with pain and worry. One shoulder was bandaged and stiff.

Flame introduced the men, telling her father what had happened.

"By Gad, when I get on my feet I'll take my shotgun to that snake," Jeff Dairen vowed. He looked at Kent and Bullhide. "You gentlemen looking for riding jobs?"

Bullhide said quickly, "Nope, not us. We got important—"

"Why, Bullhide," Kent protested. "You know we've been looking for jobs for the last year."

"Then you've come to the right place," said Jeff.

Flame said, warningly, "Daddy!"

"What, baby?"

Flushing painfully, Flame said, "You know we don't have any money to pay riders. That's why the last ones left."

Jeff Dairen nodded slowly. "I'd

forgotten. "I'm sorry, suh, but I'll have to retract that offer of jobs."

"We've already accepted," said Kent Silvers, looking at Flame. "Haven't we, Bullhide."

Old Bullhide snorted, but said nothing.

There was a tight, happy feeling inside Flame; she wished she didn't have to say what she did.

"But we can't let you do that. We don't have any money. We don't have many cattle left, and what we have are dying. Besides, it might be dangerous for you, and we might not ever have the money to pay you."

KENT SILVERS' eyes, looking at her in the soft lamplight, seemed to say, "I'll be paid, just by being where I can see you every day, and by being near you." Aloud, he said, "We'll risk all that. And now that we're hired on, maybe we'd better find out what's behind all this."

Flame told him. The 3 Star wasn't a big outfit, and the last couple of years hard luck had driven them to the wall. Jeff Dairen had been forced to borrow on the ranch; and, because Jack Lash bossed the basin, he'd borrowed from Lash. After that, disaster had dogged them at every step. Their cattle had been stolen. Then, a month ago, a bullet from ambush had knocked Jeff Dairen from his saddle, badly wounded and left for dead.

These things Jeff and Flame attributed to Jack Lash. Lash owned the great Mercury outfit, a combination of small ranches that he'd gained control of by ruthless methods. The 3 Star formed a wedge between two portions of Lash's big outfit. That was one reason why Lash wanted it. Another was that the creek which wound the length of the 3 Star held waterholes that never dried up, not even this summer, which had been the dryest in years.

"Now he's got us," Flame said dispiritedly. "Two years ago Jack Lash dammed the creek just above the line between our place and his. But, even at that, we still had holes that didn't dry up. We could stand his fence-cutting, his driving his big herds across our strip to his west portion. But, a week ago, our cows started dying, and it didn't take us long to find out that somebody had poisoned our water. We've got some water here at the house in a couple of wells, but not enough for the cattle. Another week, and we won't have a cow."

"And this Lash has got plenty of good water up behind that dam?" Kent asked thoughtfully.

"Thousands and thousands of barrels, but he won't sell a drop, even if we had the money to pay."

"I can remember the time when I would have knowed how to handle such a reptile," Bullhide Biddle said. "Now, back when me and Sheridan was licking the tar out of the Rebs—"

Flame saw her father stiffen. Jeff Dairen said, "So you're a dam'yank, suh?"

"Yes, sir-e," Bullhide said promptly. "You a Johnny Reb?"

"I was with Lee at Chancellorsville," Jeff said proudly. "But maybe you Yanks had rather not be reminded of Chancellorsville?"

Bullhide bristled. "I was with Grant at Vicksburg; maybe you Rebs had rather not talk about that, huh?"

Flame looked at Kent Silvers, and he grinned. She got up and went into the kitchen, and he followed her, leaving Bullhide and Jeff refighting the war that was long past. The time she spent in preparing a savory meal seemed no more than a minute to Flame, for Kent Silvers' gold-flecked eyes were always upon her, seeming to convey a wordless message. . . .

Jeff and Bullhide were still arguing

thirty minutes later, when she and Kent Silvers saddled a couple of horses and rode out over the range. A round yellow moon was in the sky, spraying the range with its silvery flood, and a cool wind blew against their faces. It was hard for Flame to realize that disaster hovered like a menacing shadow over her; harder for her to realize that she'd known this man beside her only a few hours.

THEY rode along the creek that threaded the 3 Star, dry now except for a few scattered holes. Several dead cows lay about the first waterhole they came to; others, wearing the 3 Star brand, pawed the earth about the hole, looking sick and droopy.

Kent Silvers sniffed the green-scummed water, and said grimly, "Arsenic."

They rode on along the creek, and soon came to the big dam, made of sod and logs, that Jack Lash had thrown across the creek. Behind the dam several acres of water gleamed in the moonlight. Kent Silvers sat looking thoughtfully at the sparkling lake, and Flame wondered what was in his mind.

But he said nothing, and a while later they rode back across the plain, avoiding the water holes.

Then Kent said softly, as if speaking to himself, "I'm a wanderer. We, Bullhide and I, have roamed from the border to the Yellowstone, always wanting to see what lay over the next hill, always restless for something new. I've never seen a range I thought I'd like to ride for more than a month, nor a girl I thought I'd love always—until a few hours ago."

Flame tried to laugh gaily, but she couldn't for her heart was racing too fast. "The moon does that to cowboys," she said.

Kent was looking at her, and he said, "Not the moon, but something a thousand times more beautiful and golden."

They rode on in silence, and Flame Dairen felt something growing and growing inside her heart. . . . When they arrived back at the ranch Jeff and Bullhide Biddle were still arguing.

"Hell'n brimstone!" she heard Bullhide say. "You Rebs are mule-stubborn. Forty years since Appomattox, and you still won't admit you're licked!"

Kent Silvers' hands were cool and strong as they lifted her onto the porch. . . .

Now it was another night, and Flame sat alone on the shadowy porch. A while before sunset Kent Silvers and Bullhide had saddled their horses and ridden away.

"A little unfinished business," Kent had grinned. "We'll be back."

Now several hours had passed, and deep inside Flame a question was stirring: Would Kent Silvers be back, or had the wanderlust taken him away again—so soon? Those words last night that had made her blood race wildly—had they been lies? She shrugged her slim shoulders. Lots of men had tried to make love to her, had said almost the same words Kent Silvers had said, and they'd left no scars on her heart.

But these men hadn't looked at her with warm golden eyes in the moonlight. And she knew that if Kent Silvers didn't come back there *would* be scars on her heart.

Sudden sound came to her ears—twin explosions that shook the earth and rolled through the night like the booming of giant drums. Then there was silence. Flame wondered what those sounds meant. They'd come from the north, from toward the big dam.

Then, a moment later, she knew. She heard a low, vague sound that quickly became a droning, rushing sound that filled the night. Flame leaped to her

feet and raced to the dry creek bed a hundred yards below the cabin. The droning roar grew louder, and then a blue torrent of water rushed past her, filling the creek from bank to bank.

Jack Lash's dam had been dynamited!

Thanksgiving rushed over her. The 3 Star cattle still alive would be saved. Then a chill feeling touched her. Instinctively, she knew that Kent Silvers and Bullhide Biddle had been the ones who dynamited the dam.

She walked slowly back to the house and told her father what had happened. And Jeff said, "By Gad, it should have been done months ago. I'm glad somebody had nerve enough to do it."

Flame went back onto the porch, and soon there was a swift rush of hoofs through the night. Expectancy flooded Flame's heart, then ebbed away sickenly. It wasn't Kent and Bullhide; it was Jack Lash, riding at the head of several Mercury cowboys.

Flame stepped from the porch, that sense of disaster deepening inside her. In the moonlight Jack Lash's dark face was savage with anger.

Lash asked, "Flame, where are the two range tramps that came here with you yesterday?"

FLAME'S lithe body stiffened. "Range tramps?"

"You know who I mean," Lash said fiercely.

"Why do you want them?"

"You know that, too. No use trying to play innocent. My dam was dynamited a few minutes ago; by morning there won't be a barrel of water left in the reservoir."

"Why come to me?" Flame asked sweetly. "I didn't do it."

"But you know who did do it," Lash said angrily. "Those two tramps did it, and you or Jeff Dairen put them up to it."

Jeff's loud voice came from the shadows. "By Gad, suh, that's a slanderous lie! We had nothing to do with blasting your filthy dam—but I'm glad it happened!"

"Glad, are you?" Lash raged. "Well, it won't help *you* any. That water won't save your ranch. Nothing, except one thing, can save it." His dark eyes riveted on Flame in a stare that made her soft flesh quiver. Her breath seemed to get tangled in her throat and choke her.

"We can live without this ranch, if we have to," she heard herself say. "And now, if that's all you came for, you can leave."

"I'll leave, all right," Jack Lash said. "But don't think I'm forgetting about that ruined dam, nor the saddlebums who did it. They've cooked themselves up a lot of trouble. And that broken dam means I'll have to transfer a lot of my cattle over to my west range; I'll have to drive them across your land." His lips quirked sneeringly. "Will that be all right?"

"Do as you please," Flame said wearily. "You will, anyhow. You've already ruined us—what more can you do?"

Jack Lash said abruptly, "If you change your mind about marrying me, let me know," and whirled his horse and thundered away at the head of his tough riders.

Flame sat down on the porch. She felt weak and numb. "The scurrilous snake," Jeff said. "If he sets foot on the 3 Star again I'll kill him!"

There was a rustling, and two figures came from the hedge of cedars that bordered the ranch yard. It was Kent Silvers and old Bullhide. Flame had a feeling they'd been in the cedars while Jack Lash made his threats a moment ago.

"Something queer's happened," Kent said, unsmiling. "That creek was dry

when we left this evening; now it's got water in it. What you figure, Bullhide?"

"Somebody must have dynamited Lash's reservoir," Bullhide said sadly.

"That's what I figure," Kent nodded. "Who do you reckon could have done such a scurvy trick?"

"It's got me stumped," said Bullhide Biddle, and it was the first time Flame had seen him grin.

"You shouldn't have done it," Flame said helplessly. "It might get you in trouble, and it won't help us any."

Kent said, "We're used to trouble, and it might help you. Me and Bullhide have been out chasing an idea, and we figure on getting it hemmed up in the morning."

"Fact," said Bullhide, like he was enjoying himself.

"What sort of idea?" Flame asked

"Wait," Kent said. "I'll tell you this much—when Mr. Jack Lash starts across 3 Star land with his cattle tomorrow, me and you and Bullhide aim to have ring-side seats."

"There's more'n one way of skinnin' a snake," Bullhide grinned, and went inside to argue with Jeff.

KENT SILVERS sat down on the porch beside Flame, and a tiny song started inside her heart. Magically, the forebodings that had tormented her a moment before vanished, and in their place was lilting hope for what the next day might bring. . . .

It brought, as Jack Lash had threatened, a mighty herd of Mercury cattle surging onto 3 Star land. Jack Lash cared nothing for fences. Flame Dairen, along with Kent and Bullhide, had concealed themselves in a thicket just below the shattered dam; they watched as Lash and several of his riders drove a thousand head of thirsty cattle through gaping rents they'd made in the line fence.

Jack Lash himself was out in front of the herd, his gaudy raiment gleaming in the early morning sun. A couple of riders flanked the herd on each side, two or three others brought up the drag. Lash was making sure that none of his cattle got to the brimming water holes in the creek below the ruined reservoir.

"Now," said Kent Silvers, and the three got onto their horses and galloped out to meet the herd.

Jack Lash saw them coming, and a scowl settled over his arrogant face. He put spurs to his big black and galloped to meet them. They met, stopped, and Lash said, "You saddlebums have got a nerve, showing your faces after what happened last night."

"What was that, mister?" Bullhide asked blandly.

"You know blasted well what happened," Lash said. "But that can wait. Move aside—you're holding up this herd."

"That's what we mean to do," said Kent Silvers.

Jack Lash asked slowly, "What do you mean by that crack?"

"What I said. We saw you cut those fences; we saw you drive your cattle onto 3 Star land. That's twice you broke the law."

"I'm the law in this basin," Lash sneered. "If I want to cut fences I cut them; I drive my cattle where and when I please."

"No," said Kent Silvers. "No. We've heard about you, Lash, and the high-handed things you've been doing, and we're going to put a stop to them—or else."

"Or else what?" Lash asked slowly.

Kent Silvers flicked aside his jacket, and the sun gleamed briefly on something that looked like a badge. Bullhide did the same, rearing back importantly in his saddle. Jack Lash's black eyes narrowed, and his face paled a little.

"So you're not saddlebums?" Lash said.

Bullhide blared, "I gonnies, who said we were—except you? Now listen, Lash, you've gone a little too far, this time. And maybe the Stockman's Association would like to know about some of the things that've been happening in this valley. So we're holding this herd, right here, till we do a little investigating."

"Stock detectives, are you?" Lash asked. "Well, you can't pin anything on me."

The big Mercury herd had stopped, was milling restlessly. Three or four of the hard-eyed riders were converging on the little group, hands near their guns. Kent Silvers saw them, and a gun leaped into his hand, covering Jack Lash.

"Stop them," Kent said.

Lash looked at the gun, licking his dry lips. Then he waved his riders back, and they bunched into a knot, watching.

"Now," Kent said, "tell your riders to drive that herd over to those water holes. We don't want the cattle to get thristy while we're investigating."

Lash said quickly, "Those cows don't need water."

"I'll be the judge of that," Kent said. "Bullhide, you help start the cattle toward that water."

BULLHIDE grinned, set spurs to his horse and galloped toward the herd. He rode along their left flank, yelling and flailing at the bawling cattle with his lariat. The thirsty cattle needed small urging. The herd started turning like a giant pinwheel, moving toward a gleaming hole of water just below the dam.

A wild, trapped look came into Jack Lash's eyes. Suddenly he yelled desperately, "Turn that herd back, you rannies. That water's full of arsenic!"

But his order had come too late. Already the foremost cows were in the water up to their flanks, and were drinking. Others were pushing in from behind, trying to get to the water.

Puzzled, Flame Dairen watched the play of emotions over Jack Lash's dark face. Despair was in his eyes as he watched his sleek cows drink the 3 Star water. She looked at Kent Silvers, and saw that he was smiling.

Kent said, "Lash, how do you know there's arsenic in that water?"

"Why—why—" Lash stammered, his face livid with helpless anger. "Never mind how I know. You drove those cows into that water; now get them out, or I'll hold you responsible for every one that dies."

Fierce triumph was suddenly hammering at Flame. She said, "He knows that water's poison—because he poisoned it!"

Bullhide Biddle had ridden up. "That's right," he said. "If he ain't the coon that did it, how would he know it was poisoned? That's mighty serious, Lash, poisoning water—it could send you to prison for life."

"I—you men can't prove I poisoned that water. Right now, get those cows out of there."

"That can wait," Kent said calmly. "Maybe we couldn't prove you poisoned that water, Lash, and cut fences and stole 3 Star cattle, and maybe we could. Anyway, you'd have a hard time disproving it. Maybe, if you were willing to remedy the great damage you've done the 3 Star—"

Lash cried, "We'll talk about that after we get those cows out of that water!"

"Now," Kent said, jiggling his gun-muzzle. "About a hundred 3 Star cows have died from that poison water. About three hundred others have been stolen during the last year. That makes four hundred head. If we let you drive

those cows out of that water, and promise to forget all these things we've found out, would you be willing to sign a bill-of-sale for four hundred head of cattle, made out to Jeff Dairen and his daughter?"

"Yes," Lash said desperately. "Anything—only get those—"

"Would you," Kent went on relentlessly, "be willing to sign a confession that you poisoned 3 Star water and stole 3 Star cattle?"

"What would you do with that confession?" Lash asked warily.

"Nothing," Kent said. "We'd just keep it, so that if you ever lifted a hand against the 3 Star again you'd be sentencing your own self to prison. Meanwhile, those cows are filling up on that water. What will it be, Lash—a confession, or a thousand dead cows?"

I'll do it!" Jack Lash said savagely.

AND he did. Kent wrote something on two separate slips of paper, and after signing his name to both slips, Jack Lash whirled his black and galloped toward the waterhole, yelling, "Get 'em out of there, you fools—do you want me to lose a thousand head of cattle?"

Under Kent's supervision, Lash's riders cut four hundred head from the Mercury herd.

"Won't they die?" Flame asked.

Kent Silvers asked, "Why should they? If Lash hadn't been so rattled, he would have realized the truth—that the water his cows were drinking was good, pure water. That hole, you'll notice, is right under the broken dam. Before the dam flooded it, it was dry; the nearest poisoned hole was two hundred yards below it. Furthermore, the flood let loose by the broken dam will cleanse the whole creek of arsenic. When Lash saw his cows drinking what he thought was poison water, he went to pieces, just like we hoped he would."

Flame sighed. "I was all up in the air, myself."

Bullhide shifted uneasily in his saddle, and said, "Hel'n beaver—you two aim to jaw here all day? If so, I'll ride on ahead and start explaining things to that ornery, mule-headed Johnny Reb named Jeff."

Back at the water hole, Kent and Flame sat looking into each other's eyes, very close together in the warm flood of sunshine.

"Your troubles are over now," Kent said slowly. "You've got back the cattle you lost, and you'll have plenty to pay off that mortgage. And Jack Lash won't bother you or your father again."

"Thanks to you and Bullhide," said Flame. "So you're a Stock detective—you weren't looking for a job, after all?"

Kent Silvers smiled, and took from under his jacket something that gleamed in the sun. It was only a piece of tin, shaped like a badge.

"Just another little trick we pulled on Jack Lash," Kent said. "We're not detectives—we're just a couple of misguided wanderers, like I said."

"And, now that you've done your good deed, you'll be wanting to see What's on the other side of the hill?"

"It depends," said Kent, his gold-flecked eyes holding her blue ones. "I've never seen a range I thought I'd like to ride for more than a month, nor a girl I thought I'd love always—until two days ago. It depends."

"On what?"

"On you, honey. If I intended to love a girl always, I'd want to marry her.

"This is not another trick, is it?"

"My word of honor. Is that enough?"

"No," she whispered. "No, that's not enough!"

Kent Silvers suddenly reached long arms, and then Flame's saddle was empty. It stayed that way all the way back to the ranch. It seemed a lot more sensible and sweeter that way . . . .

Damned by the Dark Trails

By

H. A. DE ROSSO

Author of "Greased-Holster Heritage," etc.

Hanged for horse-stealing, and for killing a couple of men—must that be the only range heritage Slim Carr could leave to this war-orphan?

His .45 pointed up at Slim Carr's chest!

THIS very evening Iron John had told him, raging from his wheel-chair, "Where's your backbone, Allan? Where's your guts? You're a lawman! Not a flighty, gossipin' woman! Sure you knew Slim Carr. Sure he's gonna have a dirty trick played on him. But he's an outlaw, boy!

"He's outside the law and you got to get him when you have the chance. Mebbe the way you take him won't set nice in your stomach, but if you let the taste of things get the best of you, you'll never make a sheriff! You gotta be hard, boy! Hard!"

The old man's hands had clenched the arms of his chairs. "There are things I did when I was sheriff that I'm not proud of, but I had to do them to put the fear of the law in skunks! If you get a chance to take a man who's

outside the law, don't pass it up! For the more outlaws that get away with their crimes, the more you'll see takin' to ridin' the dark trails. You gotta put the fear of the law into all bad men!"

So now Deputy Allan Nations crouched in the shadows beside the Wilson woodshed, tiny beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. Beside him, little Arch Whitebrook, Deke Potter's foreman, was cursing in a low tone.

"Ain't Carr ever gonna show up?" Whitebrook growled. "Ain't he ever gonna come? Deke was a fool to believe Wes Hatley. Wes just sold Deke a pack of lies for a fancy price. Slim Carr ain't comin'."

"It's still early," Allan Nations said, "only a little after midnight. Carr won't come until he's sure everybody's turned in for the night."

He lifted to his feet to ease the stiffness that had crept into his bones, and saw that a light was burning faintly behind the drawn shades in one room of the Wilson home. Sue Wilson would be in there sitting beside little Billy Carr's sick bed. She'd be sitting there, waiting, and damning Allan Nations in her soul.

NATIONS found himself fondling the brass star pinned on his shirt. He must forget that underneath that star he had a heart. What he needed was a stone to beat under that star, a stone to pump a stony fluid through his veins.

He didn't want a star over his heart. All that he desired was a small ranch, a cabin in a little grove of aspens and Sue in the doorway at evening when he should come riding home. He didn't want too much.

But Iron John—he'd grown mighty old all of a sudden. Iron John had always taken a fierce pride in wearing a star. Crippled, he was dying a lingering death. Yet seeing that deputy's badge on Allan's chest had seemed to put new life into Iron John, had seemed to fill him with a fresh desire to live. Allan couldn't turn in that star—not even if the wearing of it tore his heart and damned his soul. He couldn't turn in that star and kill Iron John.

The deputy glanced over to where Deke Potter and Wes Hatley would be hidden behind the rosebushes that formed a hedge between the Wilson home and Doc Lockerby's place. All the lawman could see was the hedge and the thick shadows that hid those lurking there.

Little Arch Whitebrook began complaining again. "This is a damn fool play. Wes Hatley is laughin' up his sleeve and thinkin' how him and Slim Carr are gonna chuckle over this trick. Deke should've known better than to think he could buy out Wes Hatley."

Nations didn't say anything to that. He was seeing Sue Wilson talking to him as she had done scarcely two hours ago. "What has come into you, Allan? You're not the boy I once knew. You're not the laughing, shy puncher who used to come courting me with Slim Carr. You're as low as Wes Hatley who sold his soul to betray the best friend he has in the world.

"Did Slim ever hurt you, Allan? He was man enough to step out when he saw how you cared for me. And he married Annie Pierce. Now she's dead and he wants to come back to see his little Billy. Slim has never seen his son. Deke Potter had framed him before Billy was born. Now Billy's sick, very sick, and so Slim is coming to see him. And you—you brave, brave man are using this means to trap him!" Then she had given him his ring. "Take it, Allan. I'm ashamed I ever wore it."

Sweat was standing out on his brow again. He heard the noise of someone levering a shell into a Winchester. That was Arch Whitebrook. The little man was tense, staring down at the willows

that lined the creek.

A shadow emerged from those willows, a man on horseback. The deputy flattened his back to the woodshed. His palm, when he grasped his gun handle, was moist. In front of him, little Arch Whitebrook fondled his rifle.

The rider came on, cautiously. His pony was stepping softly as if it realized the peril it was heading into, and as the horseman came closer and the heavier shadows fell away from him, Nations began to make him out. That long, gangling frame, those slightly stooping shoulders—that was Slim Carr all right. The same Slim Carr who had ridden with him for the old Bar Q.

THE outlaw was close now. So close that the muffled thud of his mount's hoofs pounded like violent drums in the deputy's ears. Nations lifted his .45 from leather. He swallowed to prepare his throat for the command he was to hurl.

Little Arch Whitebrook threw up his rifle and the words froze in Nations' throat. The little man wasn't just covering Slim Carr. Whitebrook's cheek rested against his weapon and his finger was curling about the trigger!

The deputy lifted his right foot and planted it heavily on Arch Whitebrook's back. The fellow sprawled on his face, his rifle tearing a livid streak into the darkness.

Nations leaped out from his shelter. His left hand closed about a bridle chain, pulling the rearing horse to a halt. His .45 pointed up at Slim Carr's chest. Nations' back was turned to those two behind the rosebushes.

"Hold your fire, Potter!" Nations ground out. "This play wasn't in the program. Hold your fire, or I'll blast your black heart!"

He released the bridle rein and his left hand unbuckled the outlaw's gunbelt. "Sorry, Slim."

Even in the darkness Nations saw the outlaw's face go white. "Nice work, Al," was all he said.

Little Arch Whitebrook came up, holding his rifle and cursing the deputy. Deke Potter showed up too, big and fat. his wide face wearing a broad smile. But Nations thought he saw something bad in the man's eyes. As if things hadn't turned out as he had planned. Behind Potter stood Wes Hatley with hanging head.

Nations motioned with his gun and Slim Carr dismounted. He held out his hands while the deputy snapped on the handcuffs. Carr's eyes searched the four, lingered on Wes Hatley. "Thanks, Wes," Carr said.

Hatley turned away, head still bowed. Deke Potter was beaming. "Got you at last, eh, Carr? You'll learn once Deke Potter gets after a man he don't get away. You'll steal my girl and then my cattle, eh? I always told Annie she'd be sorry she ever married the son of a rustler. And she was damn sorry when she died!"

Carr stepped suddenly forward, his cuffed wrists held high. Deke Potter shrank back. Arch Whitebrook swung his rifle, the barrel catching the outlaw on the shoulder, staggering him. Nations grabbed Carr, steadying him. The deputy's gun trained on Potter and his foreman.

"Shall I put leg irons on him, too, before you two tackle him?" he roared "And you stop that swearing, Arch, or I'll ram that rifle down your throat and follow it up with your sixshooter!"

They fell away. Deke Potter was growling. "You're gettin' high and mighty, Nations. You're forgettin' I elected Sheriff Brand. It'll go mighty hard on old Iron John if your badge is taken away."

"Git, Potter," Nations spat. "I can handle Slim by my lonesome. Git!"

They went away, Potter growling,

Whitebrook cursing under his breath and Wes Hatley with lowered head. Nations turned to Carr. "I reckon you'll want to see him, Slim."

The man nodded and Nations led him into the house. Sue was there awaiting them in Billy's room. Her face was white and drawn as Carr tried to smile at her. She couldn't meet his gaze and Nations saw tears start in her eyes.

Carr took one of her hands. "I know you didn't have nothin' to do with it, Sue," he said.

CARR went to Billy's bed and stood there a long time staring down at the tiny pink face. Nations glanced at Sue but she wouldn't look at him. She went over beside Slim Carr.

He had pulled the covers away briefly, then placed them back. "Big for his six months, ain't he?" he asked the girl.

She nodded.

"How is he, Sue? Is he bad sick?"

She forced a smile. "Doc Lockerby says it isn't serious, Slim. Just something that all kids get. Billy will be all right. Doc says his fever isn't so bad tonight and that he's on the mend. He'll be well in no time, Slim."

The outlaw looked down at his son for a long time. Nations could hear the child's heavy but regular breathing. After a while Slim Carr sighed and turned away.

"Good night, Sue," he said. "Let's go, Al."

Nations locked Carr in the cell at the rear of his office. The cell was for temporary confinements, usually overnight, until the prisoner could be moved to the jail at the county seat. For that reason it wasn't any too escape proof, so Nations prepared to stay in the office all night.

"Anything you'd like, Slim?" he asked as he turned the lock.

"I could eat," the man said, grinning wryly, "but it's too late for that."

"Mebbe I could scare you up something."

"Don't bother, Al. I can hold out until mornin'. I can wait. I hear tell they feed a condemned man pretty royally."

Nations was about to turn away. "Hell, don't talk like that, Slim," he growled, moving close to the bars. "You ain't been tried yet."

"But that don't mean I don't know the verdict. Guilty. Guilty as hell. And of what? Killin' a couple of men in self-defense. Only the court won't see it that way. Deke Potter will have his men on the stand swearin' that they went out to arrest me for rustlin'. That's why he had Arch Whitebrook appointed special deputy. But they weren't goin' to arrest me. *Ley del fuega.* That was their game. Shot down resistin' arrest. But I beat them to it. Killed two of them and got away. But the court won't understand it that way, Al."

"You'll be okay, Slim," Nations insisted, knowing dully that his words were empty, that the outlaw was right.

"I don't mind for myself," Slim Carr shrugged, his eyes vacant. "Annie's dead. I ain't got her no more. But there's the kid. There's young Billy. Growin' up with everybody tellin' him his old man was a cow thief. Hanged for killin' a couple of men who went out to arrest him. I know what that's gonna be like. My pa was hanged for a cow thief, too. Hanged by Deke Potter after bein' framed. I found that out ridin' the dark trails, Al. I found out a lot of things about Deke Potter. That's why he's so anxious to git me out of the way. He knows I'll kill him the first chance I get.

"He killed my pa. Then he killed my Annie. Killed her as much as if he'd placed a gun at her head and pulled trigger. He hated her for marryin' me instead of him, with him

old enough to be her father. That's the kind of man you take orders from, Al!"

"I take orders from no one, Slim. I do my duty."

The outlaw laughed derisively. "Yeh, I know, Al. You're the son of Iron John Nations whose motto about catchin' outlaws is, 'Catch as catch can' and to hell with the niceties of it. Yeh, Al, I know."

NATIONS went to the office, his face flaming. Carr's words had seared his soul. He found himself silently cursing Deke Potter. Deke Potter, boss of the big Pothook spread. Deke Potter who owned most of the country and ran all of it. It had been a fortunate day for Potter when a horse had fallen on Iron John Nations, ending his sheriffing days forever. Nations had been a hard man in a hard office, but for all his harshness, an honest man. But with Iron John out of the way, Deke Potter had had the opportunity to put his own man into office.

Sheriff Ben Brand wasn't consciously bad. He just couldn't see anyone but Deke Potter. And Iron John had raged to see a weakling in office. Crippled though he was, Iron John could still swing a lot of votes, so he had maneuvered Allan into this deputy's job. A job to give the young man experience and to win him a name so that a Nations might again someday wear a sheriff's star. That was all Iron John lived for, Allan knew.

The old man had found life worth living when he'd seen his son wearing a deputy's star. Coaching the boy, imparting to him the wisdom he'd gathered in a score of years as a lawman, had put a new light into his eyes, had made him laugh and smile again. To Iron John, it wasn't his son who was wearing the star; it was he, Iron John Nations, living his life over again in his boy. That knowledge was all that kept the old man alive.

Allan Nations glanced down at his star. "I'd admire to please you, Iron John," he whispered. "But you're askin' an awful lot."

He had just dozed off when he heard Slim Carr calling his name. The deputy stumbled up to the cell, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Carr was standing close to the bars at the side of the heavy iron door. The light was dim, only a faint glimmer from the lantern on the office desk, so that Nations did not spy the gun in the prisoner's hand until it was an inch from his waist.

Nations' drowsiness dropped away abruptly. He leveled his gaze with the out law's. "Open up," Carr said softly. "Just put your key into the lock, Al, and open up. Pronto!"

"Where'd you git that gun? You didn't have a hide-out on you. Where'd you git it?"

"Open up!"

A hammer clicked to full cock.

The deputy dug the key from his pocket. He bent close to the lock to see in the darkness. Metal rasped as the lock turned. Nations, still hunched over the key, threw his shoulder at the door. The heavy portal smashed inward, clanging to a stop against the bars.

Nations' hands were reaching, groping for the outlaw's pistol. Carr cursed, tried to line up his weapon upon Nations. But eager fingers had clasped metal, twisted it violently aside as the .45 exploded with a dull roar.

"Damn you, Al!" Carr screamed as iron fingers closed about his wrist, twisting his arm back at a crazy angle.

They slammed up against the bars. Carr began pounding at Nations with his left fist. Ducking his head against the outlaw's chest, Nations shielded his face from the blows. Sweat dripped off his chin as he twisted Carr's arm farther

back.

"Don't make me break it, Slim!" he husked out.

SUDDENLY the arm trembled in his grasp. Carr's fingers loosened and the Colt fell to the floor. Nations bent swiftly, scooped it up. Carr was slouched against the bars, breathing heavily and massaging his bruised wrist.

"That was a damn fool play," Nations told the prisoner.

"Where'd you git the gun, Slim?"

The outlaw bit off an oath.

"Better talk, Slim. I'm gonna find out. Better say."

"Who'd give me a gun?" the outlaw flared. "Name me one man in town who'd toss a gun through the cell window?"

"You didn't have a hide-out."

"I know you won't believe me, Al," Carr said, suddenly weary, "but I don't know who tossed that gun in to me. You know I haven't a friend left in town. Not now after Wes Hatley has sold me out. I knew he'd betrayed me as soon as I saw him with Deke Potter. Wes wouldn't try to get me out.

"We was raised together, me and Wes. My pa took in Wes and gave him a home when Pete Hatley died. Mebbe if I hadn't of seen Wes with Potter, I'd have believed Wes had given me the gun. As it is, Al, I don't know of anyone who gives a damn for me."

For a while the deputy couldn't find any words to say. Slim Carr laughed.

"Mebbe it was an enemy. Sure, Al, an enemy tryin' to git rid of me."

"What you mean?"

"I know a lot about Deke Potter. As long as I'm alive I can talk and mebbe even do something myself. Why not throw a gun in here? Potter knows what a stickler you are for duty. And he knows how desperate I am. Figgered on mebbe a finish fight between us two. *Ley del guega* again."

Nations hurried to his office without closing the cell door. He suddenly recalled having seen little Arch Whitebrook and his rifle lingering around the saddle shop across from the office. Nations' lips were a thin slit. Dimly he was aware that Slim Carr was following him. Nations shrugged and his fingers closed about the handle of his .45.

In the doorway he paused and glanced across the street. Thick shadows hugged the front of the saddle shop, shadows so heavy that it was impossible to pierce them with the eye. Those shadows stirred a trifle. Something hard and powerful smashed Nations in the back just as the crack of a rifle split the stillness.

He hurtled across the boardwalk to meet the dirt of the street with his face. Again the rifle barked, spitting dirt into his eyes. Nations' Colt was out. The flame of the second shot was all that he needed. His .45 bucked in his hand and a shrill scream shook the night. Someone stumbled out of the shadows to collapse in the street. It was little Arch Whitebrook.

There was the clacking pound of bootheels on the boardwalk. The deputy lurched to his knees, .45 cocked. A black figure was racing down the street. Slim Carr! The Colt steadied in Nations' hand. A harsh command formed in his throat.

HE remained thus for a second that, to him, seemed an eternity. The running figure was Slim Carr. A well aimed bullet would bring him down. A bullet would bring down Slim Carr who'd just saved Nations' life by knocking him flat on his face as Arch Whitebrook had fired. Slim Carr, who must have known that Whitebrook had been there waiting for him, not Nations, who had been mistaken in the dim light for the escaping outlaw. All Nations had to do was pull the trigger.

His gun hand dropped to his side.

Shots rang out. Slim Carr lurched and stumbled from sight in the space that separated the barber shop from the Red Ace saloon. Deke Potter was shrieking, "I've got him! I've got the dirty son!"

Nations broke into a run, his lips two white lines. He found himself damning Deke Potter over and over in his heart. They reached that narrow passageway between the barber shop and the saloon at the same time, Nations breathing thickly, Deke Potter chortling. Wes Hatley was there, too.

Nations thought that it was funny Deke Potter should have been waiting there so opportunely, as if prepared for the jail break.

Wes Hatley struck a match and held the flame high as they looked into the passageway. A sigh as of relief dropped from Hatley's lips.

"He got away. I'd swear I hit that son. But he ain't here!"

The match died out. Nations struck another. He saw the blood at the same time that Potter did. A tiny patch of red against the board wall of the barber shop. A patch as if made by a man who had leaned there a second to recover from the shock of being hit. A bit of red, shoulder high to Nations, but somewhere near the heart of the taller Slim Carr.

Deke Potter began crowing again. "He's hit. I knew he was hit. He can't git away now. Lead the way, Nations. We'll git him easy. Lead the way down that passage, Nations."

They found Carr's tracks in the alley. They led across town toward the Wilson home. Nations hadn't been able to spot any blood on the way. Just that patch back on the wall of the barber shop, and a strange gladness began to fill the deputy's heart. The tracks reached as far as the rear entrance of the house.

"The damn fool's gone to see his kid again," Potter chuckled.

The deputy was up the steps in one leap. As he pushed through the kitchen heading for Billy's room, he realized that Hatley was directly behind him with Deke Potter taking up the rear.

Carr was in the doorway as they burst in on him and Sue Wilson was still sitting up beside the bed.

NATIONS' eyes roved over the outlaw's body anxiously. There was a blotch of red on the black shirt high up on the left shoulder. From the ease with which Carr moved his arms, it couldn't be anything serious.

The deputy whirled, Sue's scream smashing into his ears. Deke Potter was throwing down on the outlaw. The murder lust was plain to read on the big man's twisted features and in his blazing eyes. Nations flung up his .45 but he knew he'd be too late.

From the corner of his eyes he saw Hatley move.

The heavy Colt in Potter's hand roared and the walls of the room seemed to shake in reply. Hatley staggered. His leap had carried him into the path of the bullet. The man's knees buckled and he sank slowly to the floor.

Potter was lining up his gun again. "Hold it, man!" Nations shouted. "Hold it, Potter, or I'll shoot!"

"Damn you for a meddlin' fool!" Potter screamed in return, his smoking barrel chopping over toward the deputy. The gun belched, but Nations had sunk to one knee and aside. His own .45 barked twice, heavily. Potter thrashed up against the wall.

Slim Carr was kneeling beside Hatley. The dying man was sobbing. "I couldn't stand it, Slim. I done you enough dirt. I couldn't stand to see that skunk shoot you down."

"Sure, Wes. Sure. I understand."

Hatley clutched eagerly at the out-

law's hand. "You'll take my hand?" he asked, the death rattle in his throat. "You'll take my hand, Slim?"

"Sure, Wes," Carr said, closing his fingers about the dying man's. "Sure. You squared yourself."

After a while he got to his feet and looked at Nations. "I'm ready to go and make no more trouble," the outlaw announced. "Potter's dead. So I'll make no more trouble. I only came here for a last look at Billy."

Nations' face was pale. His words came with an effort. "Your hoss is in the Wilsons' barn," was all he said.

Tears sprang to the outlaw's eyes. He grasped Nations by the shoulders. "Thanks, Al. Thanks," he choked.

Allan Nations walked out of the house, gun forgotten in his hand. As from afar he thought he heard Sue calling his name, but he couldn't turn around and stop.

Sheriff Ben Brand showed up around seven that morning. He came riding furiously up to the office, trailed by a couple of deputies.

Allan Nations had been standing in the doorway of his office, waiting for Brand. The man walked up to Nations and ripped the star from his shirt. "You're damn lucky that Wilson girl swears you killed Deke in self-defense and she's the only witness. But you let Carr git away. And with that gal testifying for you, I reckon I can't do nothin' to you. I've taken away your star. All these people standin' here can see your shame. I'd never have thought a son of Iron John Nations could be so worthless!"

NATIONS stood there a long time after they had all gone. Sue found him standing in front of the office, a dazed expression still on his face.

"Don't let it hurt you so, Allan. Don't let what those people think hurt you. They don't know the truth about Slim and Deke Potter. You did a noble thing in letting Slim escape. He's not bad. He told me he was quitting the country and going straight. Then he's sending for Billy. Maybe we could go away, too, after we—after we—"

A wan smile crossed Nations' face. "Sure, Sue. We'll be married if you'll still have me."

"I've never wanted any other."

He held her in his arms a while and then he gently pushed her away. "I got to go and face Iron John," he told her. "I got to go and face him."

Iron John was waiting. His knuckles were white from the force of his grip on the wheelchair.

"A fine mess of things you've made, Allan!" the old man muttered. "Twice in one night you have an outlaw in your hands and twice you let him get away. Old Joe King was here. Gossipier than an old woman he is.

"You let one man git away, and in lettin' him escape you've made many more outlaws. You've made outlaws out of those yellowbellies who've been holdin' back from ridin' the dark trails for fear that they can't git away from the law. But one man got away! Mebbe they can get away, too! So they'll take to the owlhoot! That's what comes of lettin' a prisoner escape.

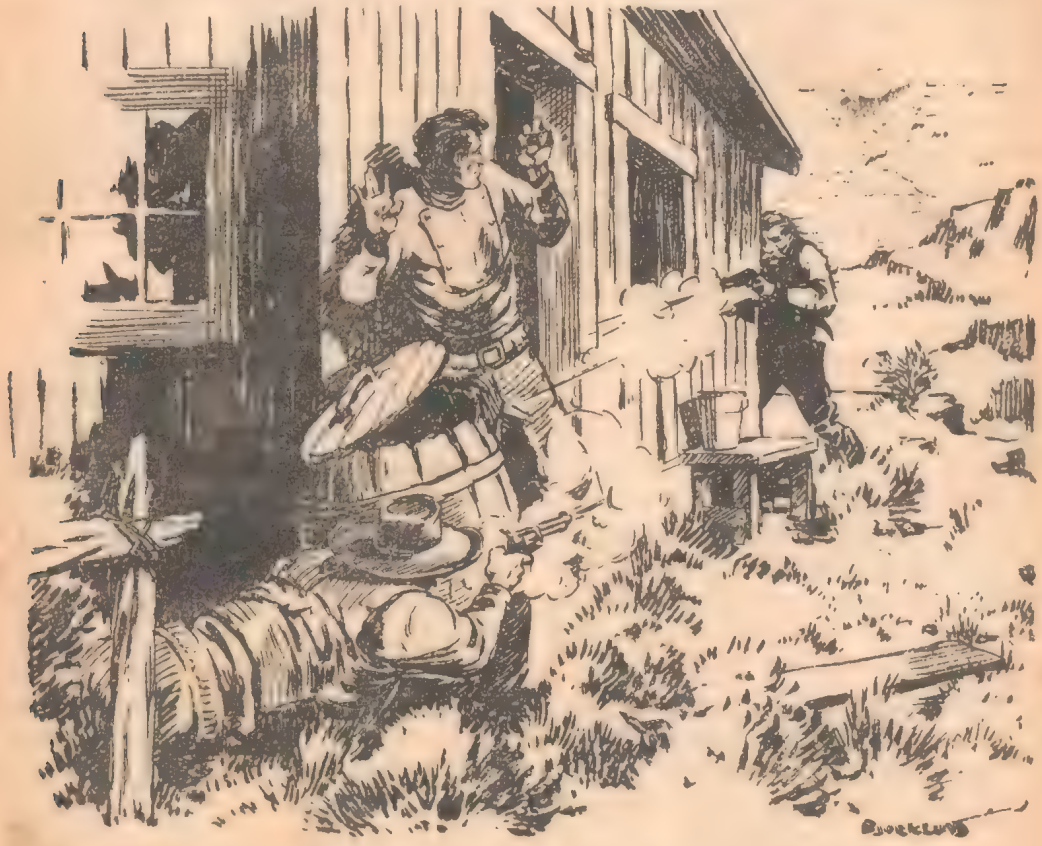
"And that ain't all, Allan. You git your badge tore off by a sheriff who ain't worth the tobacco he chews. Tore off in public so all the world can gape at the disgrace of a Nations. Tore off in a way that people can never forget. I'll never live to see a Nations wear a sheriff's star again!"

And then the old man's voice changed. "You're a failure, Allan. You'll never make a lawman. But, by damn, you make a man—a better man than I am"—and he held out his big hand anxiously. . . .

Over Gunsights

By
MOJAVE LLOYD

Dry-gulchers mebbeso bushwhacked Clint's blood-brother, but they'd have to smash Clint man-to-man over gunsights!



Broken-nosed Flint whipped around behind the shanty, guns blazing!

BIG CLINT BOLDER was scattering salt for his cows, away high in the timber, when he heard a distant rifle shot from down in the direction of Crazy Squaw Canyon. He reined in and listened. But except for the eerie whispering of the noon breeze in the pines, that region of the Manitou Mountains was as silent as all the rest of the wilderness of Southern Arizona. Bolder relaxed in the saddle. The flicker of a smile glowed in the somber eyes set deep in his craggy face.

That would be young Johnny, he thought, practicing with the new carbine Clint had given him for his tenth birthday, a weapon so precious that the freckled lad even took it to bed with him. He would be down there at the Broken Pan Mine in Crazy Squaw Canyon, showing Hugh Haggard how he would some day burn down the Rengo killers. A spattering of rifle shots crackling like pitch-pine came drifting up among the trees. Bolder sent his big roan gelding slamming down through the woods.

Clint had left his little outfit down

on Horned Owl Creek before daybreak with his salt. He knew that young Johnny aimed to ride up later as far as the abandoned Broken Pan Mine to pick around for gold. But with him would be Hugh Haggard, a sad-eyed young Easterner who had come West as a heart case. After Clint had saved his life in a gun battle in the salty town of Tres Pulgas, Hugh had lived on the outfit. He taught Johnny his school lessons and watched over him like a hawk. But why that burst of rifle fire? The bare thought of danger to Johnny knotted the muscles in Bolder's throat.

When he hit the floor of the canyon and struck the deserted shacks and tunnel mouth of the Broken Pan, he set the roan back on his fetlocks. A puzzled expression puckered his searching eyes. The gloomy old mine there in the deep canyon was as quiet as a graveyard. Clint decided maybe Johnny and Hugh had changed their minds about coming up. Then he caught a whiff of powder smoke and stiffened.

IT WAS three years now since Clint and his elder brother Tom and Tom's boy Johnny had settled in this wild region of the Manitous. Tom knew gold. Clint was a cowman. So while Tom drove a tunnel into likely quartz in the canyon wall, Clint kept them all going by getting out cedar ties for the railroad that was building into Tucson, and gradually got together a few cows.

And it was just one year ago that Tom had been riddled with lead in the night by dry-gulchers. When Clint reached there from the cabin where he and Johnny bunked down on Horned Owl Creek, Tom was dead. And the quart sealer in which they had cached three thousand dollars' worth of nuggets Tom had taken out of a pocket was gone.

The roan started to move forward gingerly, step by step, pricking his sharp ears first one way and then another. But Bolder didn't seem to notice. His bitter thoughts were buried in the past.

When Tom had needed a hand for a day or two, he had always hired Pickaxe Pete, a crusty old cuss who lived alone in a shanty back in the woods. Pickaxe was surly and mean and generally drunk, but he knew mine timbering. Clint couldn't have told why he happened to think of old Pickaxe that particular moment. Pickaxe was dead.

Several hours before Tom had been bushwhacked, Pickaxe Pete had been killed in Tres Pulgas in a gunfight with one of the three Rengo brothers, outlaws on the dodge. Everybody figured there was some connection between the two killings. The Rengos had done a fadeout. Clint had sat tight. He knew that killers had a way of returning to their kill. It was a slight metallic rattle that stung Bolder back to the present.

Twenty feet to his left was a pile of rusted old kerosene tins. He sensed there was a man hiding behind that heap of cans. The next instant he caught a sound like a rifle barrel scraping bark. That meant another man behind the woodpile between the storehouse and the mouth of the mine tunnel. And if Clint's guess was right, there was a third forted up somewhere. He was trapped.

"Hell's hinges!" he swore disgustedly. "Seemed like I heard gunshots down about here. Gettin' deef, I reckon." He pondered a minute. "No use totin' this salt home." He started to untie the sack. The nervous gelding moved. "Stand still, you roan rattler!"

Each time the big rider gave a jerk to untie the hogging strings holding the middle of the sack of rock salt to the saddle horn, the roan took one more step toward the heap of oil cans. With-

out appearing to do it, Clint was tickling the ornery mustang in the tender flesh just behind the foreleg. The same thing happened several times. Not more than ten feet now separated him from the heap of cans.

"Stand *hitched!*" Clint barked, and slid to the ground.

This put him with the heap of cans between him and the skulker behind it, and with the roan between him and the man behind the woodpile. But what Clint had in mind was evidently just what someone else wanted him to do.

A broken-nosed thug on a blaze-faced bay popped his mount around the corner of the cabin with a six-shooter spiking from his fist. "Reach!" he rasped.

"Flint Rengo!" whispered Clint, tight-lipped.

HE reached all right, but he seemed to reach in a good many directions at once. The sack of rock salt came loose and demolished the can heap in the face of whoever was behind it. With the same motion, Bolder's long-barreled old Colts came whistling out of its holster.

The broken-nosed rider let fly. Lead came whizzing from behind the woodpile and the can heap. Bolder's Colts blared once over the saddle, then again beneath the rearing roan's neck.

Flint Rengo was knocked almost out of the saddle. A boot that had been protruding from behind the woodpile disappeared to the tune of a hoarse yell from whoever owned it. The maddened roan jerked loose and went over backward. Clint's right leg caved in. He sprang off the left foot and hurdled the tumbling cans.

But Pug, the stubby one of the Rengo crew, leaped from there to the shelter of a pile of rubble near the tunnel mouth. And before Clint could snap a shot at him, he vanished around the corner of the cabin. Bolder fell.

The mounted killer righted himself and threw a slug that burned Clint across the shoulders as he went down. He rolled, firing as he went. Just as he hit the mine tunnel mouth, he saw Flint Rengo's hat go soaring into a sumac bush and Rengo clap a hand to his head. Then he heard the scream of gravel as horses went racing up the canyon.

He crawled out and watched the three thugs whirl into the protection of a bend in the canyon wall. Flint Rengo's left arm was dangling. Fat Otto was clutching the saddle horn. Flint stuck his scorched head out.

"We've did better so far than you figger we have!" he bawled. Then gravel rattled again as the three spurred on up the canyon.

Clint examined his leg. The bone seemed uninjured, but a gaping flesh wound was spouting blood. He tore strips from his shirt and tried to stop the flow, but only partly succeeded. The wound across his shoulders he couldn't reach at all. It was plain on its face that shooting it out with the Rengos would have to wait till he got patched up.

Using a piece of two-by-four for a crutch, he managed to catch up the roan and drag himself into the saddle. It was then he saw the meaning of that volley of shots he had heard. The Rengos had broken into the storeroom by shooting a circle of holes around the door lock. But why, he wondered, would they do that?

He eased his wounded leg and debated. He could ride down the canyon and on down Horne Owl Creek to the outfit, make sure Johnny and Hugh were there, then go on to Tres Pulgas to the doctor. But that was a wide circle compared to the cut-off trail to Tres Pulgas from the head of the canyon. It seemed certain that the boy

and Haggard were all right. And he was afraid if he didn't get to a doctor in a hurry he would bleed out. He swung the roan up the canyon on the Rengos' trail.

He figured the Rengos too would have to head for Tres Pulgas, only sixteen miles west. The next closest doctor was in Tucson, a hard sixty-mile ride, although a man could ride south ten miles to Dugan's Crossing and catch the Tucson stage. Bolder rode with brooding eyes probing every clump of catclaw, every rock and gully and scrub juniper thicket along the sun-scorched trail.

BUT he rode into Tres Pulgas without seeing a sign of the Rengos and found old Doctor Bullwinkle at his customary afternoon chore. With a dead cigar stub jutting from his whiskers, he was sleepily scraping frontier tunes from a scarred old fiddle. At sight of the battered Bolder, he dropped his spectacles from his forehead to his nose by a movement of his ears and got busy.

While the old surgeon was cauterizing the hole in his leg, Clint's square knuckles showed white against the chair arms. He said, "Did them Rengos all live through it, Doc?"

The doctor bent over his bandaging. "*What* Rengos?"

A queer idea clicked in Bolder's head. "You seen Hugh Haggard?"

"No!" Bullwinkle grunted. "Who else'd you kill?"

Old Gab Spry came hobbling into the office on his cane. The gabby old owner of the Tres Pulgas Mercantile Emporium eased himself groaningly into a chair. "Just drove in from Tucson in my new buckboard," he croaked. "Got one hell of a crick in my back. You fix cricks, Doc?"

He peered at Bolder out of wise little red eyes. "Who you aiming to get for a new schoolteacher for Johnny?"

"Hold still, Clint!" snapped Bullwinkle.

Bolder's bleak eyes were riveted on the wizened face of the gossipy old storekeeper. His voice was flat. "Meaning what?"

"Come through Dugan's Crossing on my way of course," croaked the oldster. "Seen them back-shooting Rengo boys. They was shot up considerable. Other feller waiting for the stage was Hugh Haggard."

As Clint went winging away through the darkening chapparal, not on the trail he had come in on, but on the long trail to the outfit, his thoughts were torment. He knew Haggard needed money to go East for a costly operation. But what possible hook-up could there be between the man whose life he had saved and that Rengo pack? And where was young Johnny? That was the question that drove the pain from the throbbing leg and back. He leveled the big roan off like a locoed jackrabbit.

The moon had topped the pine-crested peaks of the Manitous when he splashed through the shallows of Horned Owl Creek and went surging up the hill to the outfit. No light shone a welcome from the cabin window. A thin white line formed around Clint's mouth. He searched every building. Johnny was gone.

Bolder watered the roan at the trough at the far end of the haybarn, stripped his gear off and threw him into the corral. He was saddling a tall slab-sided chestnut that looked as if he could run over an antelope when he heard a horse stomp somewhere in the darkness outside the corral. No horse should be loose out there.

Clint snubbed the chestnut to a corral pole and limped in the direction of the sound. It was so dark there, in the shadow of the hayracks, that he

was right on top of the stomping horse before he spotted him. He grabbed a trailing rein and let his breath go softly between his teeth. It was the golden colt Johnny always rode.

The colt was still saddled. But the birthday carbine was missing from the boot. Clint's stomach felt as though he'd swallowed a hatful of horseshoe nails.

His fingers told him that the off rein was snapped about four feet from the bit. But when he scratched a match, his eyes told him something else.

At the very tip of the broken rein was the imprint of a sharp hoof. The colt may have been tied and snapped the rein in breaking loose, then stepped on it afterward. But it could also be that the lad had been piled and the colt had stepped on the rein and snapped it when he ran away. He could have bucked the boy's precious carbine out of the scabbard. And Johnny had aimed to ride to the Broken Pan and the Rengos had been there.

Suddenly Clint's ears rang with Flint Rengo's parting taunt. "We've did better so far than you figger we have!"

AT THE Broken Pan, he quickly spotted the tracks of Johnny's small boots. They crossed from the cabin to the mine tunnel, then back to the cabin again. And there were the hoofprints where the colt had been tied to the hind wheel of a rotting wagon and had broken loose. But it was when Clint followed the lad's footprints back down the canyon and came to the end of the trail that the crowsfeet deepened at the corners of his somber eyes.

Instead of footing it for home, Johnny had turned sharply and gone straight up the sheer canyon wall.

Bark from the trunks of the stunted pine growth that matted the face of the wall lay in a heap at Bolder's feet. As high as he could see in the gloom, the soft sandstone was scored by the marks of the boy's swinging boots. Johnny had clawed his way up through that treacherous growth. It dawned on Clint what lay just back of the canyon rim at that point. It was the trail from the head of the canyon to the tumbledown shanty of the dead Pickaxe Pete.

Clint reached his chestnut at a hobbling run, stormed up through the top of the canyon and circled to where he judged the lad had come up over the rim. He was on his hands and knees in the rimrock brush when a pony, its hoofbeats muffled in the spongy carpet of pine needles on the trail, bounded almost on top of him. In the saddle hunched a stubby rider far too much like Pug Rengo. Bolder sprang.

With his whang-leather body in the air, his left hand caught the cheek-strap of the pony's bridle. The rider cursed hoarsely and whipped up a six-gun. Clint slid under the gun and swung the walnut butt of his old Colts crunching against the side of the man's head.

The rider's gun exploded in Clint's face. At that same instant, the frantic pony lashed out with a wicked fore-foot. It caught Bolder flush in the chest, spinning him over the rim of the canyon wall.

He clawed madly at the bushes fringing the brink. They tore loose. His Colts flew from his fist. He clutched a pine root. It snapped. Blinded and choked with powder smoke, he went hurtling down the sheer wall.

It was the moon in his face that roused him. He rolled his tortured body over and tried to go to sleep again. Then memory sent him staggering to his feet.

He took one look at the sheer wall, where his plummeting body had dug a ragged furrow in the matted growth of

scrub that had saved his life. Then he went weaving up the canyon to get back on the rim again.

Upon the rimrock trail, he stumbled on his slab-sided chestnut and a strange buckskin peacefully browsing in a patch of deerbrush. Both had their reins tangled and weren't hard to catch. Clint swung the buckskin to get the moonlight on his forequarter brand, then tipped back on his heels.

The brand was the Triangle B of Toby Barker, the one-legged old coot who ran the feed stable in Tres Pulgas.

Bolder found the buckskin's rider still sprawled on his face where he'd been clubbed. To Clint, he didn't look quite loose enough in his clothes to be dead. He turned him over and lit a match. "Holy haystacks!" he whispered. "Now I *have* did it!"

He scratched another match and peered down into the corpselike face. "I've bashed the brains out of old Doc Bullwinkle!"

HE STRAIGHTENED painfully and wiped his blood-caked face with the back of his hand. How could the old surgeon be *there?* Then it struck him. He had spent quite a while searching the outfit for Johnny. And the doctor could have ridden the cut-off trail. But what was he out there for anyhow? It didn't make sense. Clint gave it up.

He found his Colts and the doctor's gun, then lifted Bullwinkle gently across the buckskin's saddle and got him down to a spring in the canyon and went to work on him.

In about ten minutes the crusty old physician's eyelids fluttered. Clint propped him up against a boulder. He fumbled for his glasses' case in an inside pocket and banged the spectacles on his blood-smeared nose. His eyes shot fire. His pointed beard bristled like porcupine quills.

"Who the blazes clouted me?" he roared.

"Figured you for Pug Rengo," Clint told him. "You seen Johnny?"

"Too cock-eyed much!" old Bullwinkle sputtered. "He's up around Pickaxe Pete's shanty, stalking Haggard's killers, or his dead body. I was on my way to the Horned Owl to try to find you."

Clint said tightly, "By now, Haggard's in Tucson."

"Nothing of the kind," denied Bullwinkle. He wiped his spectacles with a blood-smeared thumb, then swore savagely because he couldn't see through them.

"Johnny found Haggard dead or dying in Pickaxe Pete's shanty," he grumbled, "and high-tailed it to town for me on Hugh's pony. But if Hugh went to heaven he took his body along. Anyhow, when we got back it wasn't in the shanty."

Clint's lips drew tight over his teeth. "And you mean to set there and tell me," he said, "you left that ten-year-old boy up there at Pickaxe's place hunting outlaws on his own?"

"*Left* nothing!" yelped the doctor. "He just *stayed!* If that boy lives with you much longer, he'll think he's Wild Bill Hickok. He grabbed one of my pistols too."

"What become of his new carbine?"

"How the devil should I know?"

Bolder shoved to his feet. "Come on!" he gritted. He boosted old Bullwinkle into the saddle, lurched on to the chestnut and led off toward Pickaxe Pete's at a slashing run.

They were most of the way to the shanty when they heard the gunshot. The chestnut left the doctor as though the buckskin was nailed to a post.

Clint was bursting from the cedar thicket that hid the ramshackle shanty when he saw the three Rengos charge from the lighted doorway with their

guns blazing. Fat Otto was using a limb of a tree for a crutch. Flint's left arm was in a sling.

Bolder's Colts doubled the fat one up like a claspknife. A lance of flame from where somebody was forted up behind a stump downed the stubby Pug. But broken-nosed Flint, the deadliest of the pack, whipped around behind the shanty and went plunging out of the clearing on his boogered blaze-face. Old Bullwinkle emptied his six-shooter at him without touching a hair.

But that slab-sided chestnut Clint was spur-riding was just too much horse for the blaze-face. He overhauled him like he'd run down a cow. At the edge of the timber, Flint Rengo threw a glance over his shoulder and saw the game was up. He wheeled like a rattler coiling.

CLINT clamped the chestnut back on his haunches. "You tossing in your chips, Rengo?" he said quietly.

But for all he was an owlhooter, Flint Rengo had never learned how to quit. His smoking gun slewed round. Its explosion and the blare of Bolder's old Colts made one single hollow blast that went rolling away among the rocky peaks.

Fint Rengo grabbed for the saddle horn, but missed it. He hung there for a moment, balanced in one stirrup, then pitched on his face.

Clint and the doctor and Johnny carried Pug Rengo, the one Johnny had shot from behind the stump, into the shanty where the doctor could set his broken thigh bone. There they found Hugh Haggard, securely hog-tied, and quickly released him. Except for a ragged welt on the side of his head, he was unhurt.

He sat up and smiled his sad-eyed smile. "Look in the oven, Clint."

Bolder reached in the oven of the cracked old cookstove, then straight-

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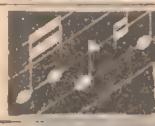

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ened slowly. In his hand was a quart sealer two-thirds full of gold nuggets that gleamed in the lantern light. Bullwinkle snorted in his whiskers. Clint looked at Haggard without speaking.

"Johnny stayed behind this morning to pare his pony's hoofs," Haggard said. "I got to the mine alone and got slugged by the Rengos. I guess they thought I was dead and packed me up here to get me out of the way." He pointed to a loose board in the rear wall of the shack. "When I came to, I thought likely there'd be a guard outside the door, so I pried a board loose to get out. That jar was buried in behind the bottom of the board."

"So *that* was it," Clint said softly. "Old Pickaxe stole this gold, then went to town and gave the Rengos a false lead that it was cached at the mine. He calculated them buzzards would burn Tom down and wreck the place, so his own tracks would be covered. The one thing he misfigured was that they'd kill him first to shut his mouth."

"I was afraid to go down to the outfit or to look for you," Haggard went on, "because I didn't know where the Rengos had gone. So I caught up one of their packhorses and lit out for Tucson to get those nuggets in the bank. But the Rengos grabbed me again at Dugan's Crossing. My only way out then was to let on I knew where there was lots more gold hidden. That made them bring me back in a hurry. I told them I'd cached the stuff in the woods and couldn't locate it in the dark. So they holed up here to wait for daylight."

Clint stood turning the sealer thoughtfully in his hand, watching the play of the lantern light on the gleaming nuggets. The crows-feet at the corners of his brooding eyes were twitching. "The half of this that was Tom's," he said quietly, "belongs to Johnny. The other half, Hugh, takes you East for your operation."

Johnny said, "You two boys divvy it up. I'm young. I got plans for making barrels of money."

"It's Bolder gold," asserted Hugh Haggard, smiling wanly. "Besides, I'm not going any place. I like it here."

"Keno!" Clint said. "She's a three-way split. And from here on out, the three of us is pardners." He faced the youngster.

"Son," he said kindly, "what made you shin up that wall in the Crazy Squaw?"

Johnny was perched on a bunk rail busily polishing a rifle with a sleeve of his torn shirt. He cuffed his hat brim back and looked up with shining blue eyes.

"When my pony broke loose and Hugh wasn't at the mine," he said, "I started to hoof it home. Then I recollected Hugh said something about picking blueberries for a pie from them bushes around Pickaxe Pete's shanty. So up I went."

The trace of a smile softened Clint's craggy features. "How come you didn't play dogie till I got here, instead of popping them buzzards out by shooting a hole in the stovepipe?"

Johnny wrinkled up his freckled nose. "Them danged Rengos," he said solemnly, "had my new carbine."

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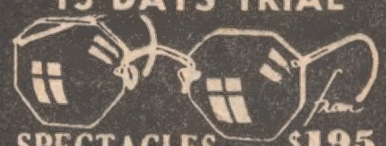

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